THE ®

saint MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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MARCH

Edited by LESLIE CHARTERIS

Blood Oath
by RICHARD DEMING

Untouchable
by ROBERT BLOCH

The Hands of Death
by BRUNO FISCHER

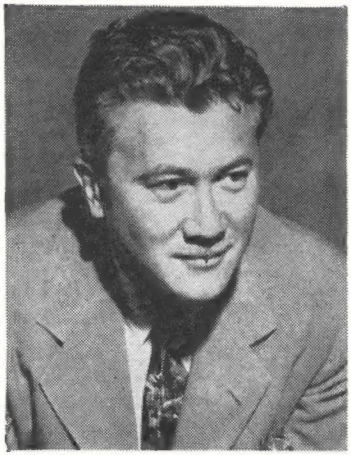
Corpse Doctor
by STEWART STERLING

The Tall Timber
by LESLIE CHARTERIS

The Friendly Murderer

A NEW STORY by LAWRENCE TREAT

SOME OLD, SOME NEW — THE FINEST IN MYSTERY FICTION



AT REGULAR INTERVALS, I get a letter from some genius or other who has been staggered by the inspiration of the century, who says in effect: "Why haven't you ever thought of putting the Saint on television? It would be so much better than most of the stupid shows on the air." And so on . . .

At the risk of crushing a large number of other well-meaning prompters who may even at this moment be planning to write to me in the same vein, I must expose first the brutal fact that television shows are not put on by authors, but by advertising agencies, or by networks which hope to sell them to advertising agencies, which in turn hope to sell them to sponsors, who are otherwise respectable citizens with a frantic obsession about selling more mouthwash, laxatives, or bubble gum than their competitors.

Since these monomaniacs have the extraordinary delusion that the more people who watch their show, the more people will buy their dandruff remedy, they are not interested in sponsoring the best possible show, but the show which will please the biggest audience and offend the smallest—which is by no means the same thing.

From which stems the conviction of the sponsors, the advertising agencies, and the networks, that they must all ride herd on the creative talent, to make sure that nothing slips on the screen which might possibly antagonize a potential customer—regardless of how many other potential customers are so bored that they just try another station. From which it is only a short step to these patrons dictating what the creative talent shall create. From which, since neither manufacturing nor huckstering have in any way culture been considered qualifications for creating or criticizing any work of art, come the aforesaid stupid shows on the air.

It should be obvious that a property like the Saint has not been overlooked in this desperate search for anything that might hold a listener long enough to hear a commercial. In fact, for years, or ever since the Idiot Box became the central piece of American furniture, I have been receiving and turning down propositions at an average rate of one per month.

Why? Because, for a start, not one of these impresarios would concede that I should have the absolute right to approve or veto what could be done in a television script with the character I created, which they theoretically want to buy . . .

You heard me.

Leslie Charteris

saint
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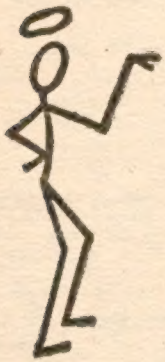

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the tall timber

by . . . Leslie Charteris

When this woodsman cried "Timber!" it meant a sucker was falling . . .

THE QUEER THINGS that have led Simon Templar into the paths of boodle would in themselves form a sizable volume of curiosities; but in the Saint's own opinion none of these strange starting-points could ever compare, in sheer intrinsic uniqueness, with the moustache of Mr. Sumner Journ.

Simon Templar's relations with Chief Inspector Teal were not always unpleasant. On that morning he had met Mr. Teal on Old Compton Street and insisted on standing him lunch; and both of them had enjoyed the meal.

"And yet you'll probably be trying to arrest me again next week," said the Saint.

"I shouldn't be surprised," said Mr. Teal heavily.

They stood in the doorway of Wheeler's, preparing to separate; and Simon was idly scanning the street when the moustache of Mr. Sumner Journ hove into view.

Let it be said at once that it was no ordinarily overgrown moustache, attracting attention by nothing but its mere vulgar size. It was, in fact, the reverse. From a slight distance no moustache was visible

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MANY AND INGENIOUS ARE THE LURES OF THE BUNCO ARTIST, BUT THE SAINT HAD SELDOM HEARD OF A MORE IMAGINATIVE SPIEL THAN THIS.

From: THE SAINT INTERVENES
Copyright, 1934, by Leslie Charteris; Renewed, 1961.

at all; and the Saint was looking at Mr. Journ simply by accident, as a man standing in the street will sometimes absent-mindedly follow the movements of another. As Mr. Journ drew nearer, the moustache was still imperceptible; but there appeared to be a slight shadow on his upper lip, as if it were disfigured by a small mole. And it was not until he was passing a yard away that the really exquisite singularity of the growth dawned upon Simon Templar's mind.

On Mr. Sumner Journ's upper lip, approximately fourteen hairs had been allowed to grow, so close together that the area they occupied could scarcely have been larger than a shirt button. These fourteen hairs had been carefully parted in the middle; and each little clique of seven had been carefully waxed and twisted together so that they stuck out about half an inch from their patron's face like the horns of a snail. In the whole of Simon Templar's life, which had encountered a perhaps unusual variety of developments of facial hair, ranging from the handlebar protuberances of the Southshire Insurance Company's private detective to the fine walrus effect sported by a Miss Gertrude Tinwiddle who contributed the nature notes in the *Daily Gazette,* he had never seen any example of hair culture in which such passionate devotion to detail, such a concentrated ecstasy of miniaturism, such an unostentatious climax of originality, had simultaneously arrived at concrete consummation.

Thus did the moustache of Mr. Journ enter the Saint's horizon and pass on, accompanied by Mr. Journ, who looked at them rather closely as he went by; and lest any suspicious reader should be starting to get ideas into his head, the historian desires to explain at once that this moustache has nothing more to do with the story, and has been described at such length solely on account of its own remarkable features *qua* face-hair. But, as we claimed at the beginning, it is an immutable fact that if it had not been for this phenomenal decoration the Saint would hardly have noticed Mr. Journ at all, and would thereby have been many thousands of pounds poorer. For, shorn of that incomparable appendage, Mr. Journ was quite an ordinary-looking business man, thin, dark, hatchet-faced, well and quietly dressed; and although he was noticeably hard about the eyes and mouth, there was really nothing else about him which would have caused the Saint to stare fascinatedly after him and ejaculate in a hushed voice: "Well, I am a piebald pelican balancing rubber balls on my beak!"

Wherefore Mr. Teal would have had no reason to turn his somnolent gaze back to the Saint with a certain dour and puzzled humour, and to say: "I should have thought he was a fellow you'd be sure to know."

"Never set eyes on him in my life," said the Saint. "Do you know who he is?"

"His name's Sumner Journ," Mr. Teal said reluctantly, after a slight pause.

Simon shook his head.

"Even that doesn't ring a bell," he said. "What does he do? No bloke who cultivated a nose-tickler like that could do anything ordinary."

"Sumner Journ doesn't," stated the detective flatly.

He seemed to have realised that he had said too much already; and it was impossible to draw any further information from him. He took his leave rather abruptly, and Simon gazed after his plump departing back with a tiny frown. The only plausible explanation of Teal's sudden taciturnity was that Mr. Journ was engaged in some unlawful or nearly unlawful activities—Teal had had enough trouble with the victims whom the Saint found for himself, without conceiving any ambition to press fresh material into his hands. But if Chief Inspector Teal did not want the Saint to know more about Mr. Sumner Journ, that was sufficient reason for the Saint to become abnormally inquisitive; and as a matter of fact, his investigations had not proceeded very far when a minor coincidence brought them up to date without further effort.

"This might interest you," said Monty Hayward one evening.

"This" was a very tastefully prepared booklet, on the cover of which was printed: "BRAZILIAN TIMBER BONDS: *A Gold Mine for the Small Investor.*" Simon took it and glanced at it casually; and then he saw something on the first page of the pamphlet which brought him to attention with a delighted start:

> *Managing Director*
> SUMNER JOURN, Esq., *Associate of the Institute of Timber Planters, Fellow of the International Association of Wood Pulp Producers; formerly Chairman of South American Mineralogical Investments, Ltd., etc., etc.*

"How did you get hold of this, Monty?" he asked.

"A young fellow in the office gave it to me," said Monty. "Apparently he was trying to make a bit of money on the side by selling these bonds; but lots of people seem to have heard about 'em. I pinched the book, and told him not to be an ass because he'd probably find himself in clink with the organizers when it blew up; but I thought you might like to have a look at it."

"I would," said the Saint thoughtfully and poured another Peter Dawson.

He read the booklet through at his leisure, later, and felt tempted to send Monty Hayward a complimentary case of Old Curio on the strength of it; for the glow of contentment and goodwill towards

men which spreads over the rabid entomologist who digs a new kind of beetle out of a log is as the frosts of Siberia to the glow which warms the heart of the professional buccaneer who uncovers a new swindle.

For the stock-in-trade of Mr. Sumner Journ was Trees.

It may be true, as the poet bleats, that Only God Can Make A Tree; but it is also true that only a man capable of growing such a moustache as lurked coyly beneath the sheltering schnozzola of Mr. Sumner Journ could have invented such an enticing method of making God's creation pay gigantic dividends.

The exposition started off with a picture of some small particles of matter collected in a tea-cup; and it was explained that these were the seeds of *pinus palustris,* or the long-leaved pine. "Obviously," said the writer, "even a child must know that these can only be worth a matter of pennies." There followed an artistic photograph of some full-grown pines rearing towards the sky. "Just as obviously," said the writer, "everyone must see that these trees must have *some* value worth mentioning; probably a value that would run into pounds." The actual value, it was explained, did indeed run into pounds; in fact, the value of the trees illustrated would be £3 or more. Furthermore, declared the writer, whereas in Florida these trees took 45 years to reach maturity, in the exceptional climate of the Brazilian mountains they attained their full growth in about 10 years. The one great drain on timber profits hitherto had been the cost of transport; but this the Brazilian Timber Company had triumphantly eliminated by purchasing their ground along the banks of the Parana River (inset photograph of large river) which by the force of its current would convey all logs thrown into it to the coast *at no cost at all.*

Investors were accordingly implored, in their own interests, to gather together at least £30 and purchase with it a Brazilian Timber Bond—which could be arranged, if necessary, by instalments. On buying this bond, they would become the virtual owners of an acre of ground in this territory, and the seeds of trees would be planted in it without further charge. It was asserted that twenty-five trees could easily grow on this acre, which when cut down at maturity would provide 100 cords of wood. Taking the price of wood at £3 a cord, it was therefore obvious that in about 10 years' time this acre would be worth £300—"truly," said the prospectus, "a golden return on such a modest investment." The theme was developed at great length with no little literary skill, even going so far as to suggest that on the figures quoted, the investor who bought one £30 bond every year for 10 years would in the ele-

venth year commence to draw an annuity of £300 per annum *for ever,* since as soon as the trees had been felled in the first acre *it could be planted out again.*

"Well, have you bought your Brazilian Timber Bond?" asked Monty Hayward a day or two later.

Simon grinned and looked out the window—he was down at the country house in Surrey which he had recently bought for a week-end retreat.

"I've got two acres here," he murmured. "We might look around for somebody to give us sixty quid to plant some more trees in it."

"The really brilliant part of it," said Monty, filling his pipe, "is that this bloke proposes to pay out all the profit in a lump in ten years' time; but until then he doesn't undertake to pay anything. So if he's been working this stunt for four years now, as it says in the book, he's still got another five years clear to go on selling his bonds before any of the bondholders has a right to come around and say: 'Oi, what about my three hundred quid?' Unless some nosey parker makes a special trip into the middle of Brazil and comes back and says there aren't any pine trees growing in those parts, or he's seen the concession and it's just a large swamp with a few blades of grass and a lot of mosquitoes buzzing about, I don't see how he can help getting away with a fortune if he finds enough mugs."

The Saint lighted a cigarette.

"There's nothing to stop him taking it in," he remarked gently, "but he's still got to get away with it."

Mr. Sumner Journ would have seen nothing novel in the qualification. Since the first day when he began those practical surveys of the sucker birth-rate, the problem of finally getting away with it, accompanied by his moustache and his plunder, had never been entirely absent from his thoughts, although he had taken considerable pains to steer a course which would keep him outside the reach of the Law. But the collapse of South American Mineralogical Investments, Ltd., had brought him within unpleasantly close range of danger, and about the ultimate fate of Brazilian Timber Bonds he had no illusions.

Simon Templar would have found nothing psychologically contradictory in the fact that a man who, cultivating the world's most original moustache with microscopic perfection of detail, had overlooked the fundamental point that a moustache should be visible, should, when creating a Timber Company, have overlooked the prime essential that the one thing which a Timber Company must possess, its *sine qua non,* so to speak, is timber. Mr. Journ had compiled his inducements with unlimited care from encyclopædias and the information supplied by

genuine timber-producing firms, calculating the investors' potential profits according to a mathematical system of his own; the only thing he had omitted to do was to provide himself with the requisite land for afforestation. He had selected his site from an atlas, and had immediately forgotten all the other necessary steps towards securing a title to it.

In the circumstances, it was only natural that Mr. Sumner Journ, telling tall stories about timber, should remember that the day was coming when he himself would have to set out, metaphorically at least, in the direction of the tall timber which is the fugitive's traditional refuge; but he reckoned that the profit would be worth it. The only point on which he was a trifle hazy, as other such schemers have been before him, was the precise moment at which the getaway ought to be made; and it was with a sudden sinking of heart that he heard the name of the man who called to see him at his office on a certain afternoon.

"Inspector Tombs?" he said with a rather pallid heartiness. "I think I have met you somewhere before."

"I'm the C.I.D. Inspector in this division," said the visitor blandly.

Mr. Journ nodded. He knew now where he had seen his caller before —it was the man who had been talking to Chief Inspector Teal in Swallow Street, and who had stared at him so intently.

Mr. Journ opened a drawer and took out a box of cigars with unsteady hands.

"What can I do for you, Inspector?" he asked.

Somewhat to his surprise, Inspector Tombs willingly helped himself to a handful, and sat down in an armchair.

"You can give me money," said Inspector Tombs brazenly; and the wild leaping of Sumner Journ's heart died down to a painful throbbing.

"For one of your charities, perhaps? Well, I have never been miserly—"

The Saint shook his head.

"For me," he said flatly. "The Yard has asked us to keep an eye on you, and I think you need a friend in this manor. Chuck the bluffing, Journ—I'm here for business."

Sumner Journ was silent for a moment; but he was not thinking of resuming the bluff. That wouldn't help. He had to thank his stars that his first police visitor was a man who so clearly and straightforwardly understood the value of hard cash.

"How much do you want?"

"Two hundred pounds," was the calm reply.

Mr. Journ put up a hand and twirled one of the tiny horns of his wee moustache with the tip of his finger and thumb. His hard brown eyes studied Inspector Tombs unwinkingly.

"That's a lot of money," he said with an effort.

"What I can tell you is worth it," Simon told him grimly.

Mr. Journ hesitated for a short time longer, and then he took out a cheque-book and dipped his pen in the inkwell.

"Make it out to Bearer," said the Saint, who in spite of his morbid affection for the cognomen of "Tombs" had not yet thought it worth while opening a bank account in that name.

Journ completed the cheque, blotted it, and passed it across the desk. In his mind he was wondering if it was the fee for Destiny's warning: if Scotland Yard had asked the local division to "keep an eye on him," it was a sufficient hint that his activities had not passed unnoticed, and a suggestion that further inquiries might be expected to follow. He had not thought that it would happen so soon; but since it had happened, he felt a leaden heaviness at the pit of his stomach and a restless anxiety that arose from something more than a mere natural resentment at being forced to pay petty blackmail to a dishonest detective. And yet, so great was his seasoning of confidence that even then he was not anticipating any urgent danger.

"Well, what can you tell me?" he said.

Simon put the cheque away.

"The tip is to get out," he said bluntly; and Mr. Journ went white.

"Wha-what?" he stammered.

"You shouldn't complain," said the Saint callously. "You've been going for four years, and you must have made a packet. Now we're on to you. When I tell you to get out, I mean it. The Yard didn't ask us to keep an eye on you. What they did was to send an order through for a raid this afternoon. Chief Inspector Teal is coming down himself at four o'clock to take charge of it. That's worth two hundred pounds to know, isn't it?"

He stood up.

"You've got about an hour to clear out—you'd better make the most of it," he said.

For several minutes after the detective had gone Mr. Journ was in a daze. It was the first time that the consequences of his actions had loomed up in his vision as glaring realities. Arrest—police court—remand—the Old Bailey—penal servitude—the whole gamut of a crash, he had known about in the abstract like everyone else; but his self-confident imagination had never paused to put himself in the leading rôle. The sudden realisation of what had crept up upon him struck him like a blow in the solar plexus. He sat trembling in his chair, gasping like a stranded fish, feeling his knee-joints melting like butter in a frightful paralysis of panic. Whenever he had visualised the end before, it had never been like this: it had been on a date of his own choosing, after he had made all his

plans in unhurried comfort, when he could pack up and beat his trail for the tall timber as calmly as if he had been going off on a legitimate business trip, without fear of interference. This catastrophe pouncing on him out of a clear sky scattered his thoughts like dry leaves in a gale.

And then he got a grip on himself. The getaway still had to be made. He still had an hour—and the banks were open. If he could keep his head, think quickly, act and plan as he had never had to do before, he might still make the grade.

"I'm feeling a bit washed out," he told his secretary; and certainly he looked it. "I think I'll go home."

He went out and hailed a taxi, half expecting to feel a heavy hand drop on his shoulder even as he climbed in.

It was getting late, and he had several things to do. He had been so sure that his Brazilian Timber Bonds had a long lease of life ahead of them that he had nót yet given any urgent thought to the business of shifting his profits out of the country. At the first bank where he called he presented a cheque whose size pushed up the cashier's eyebrows.

"This will practically close your account, Mr. Journ," he said.

"It won't be out for long," Journ told him, with all the nonchalance he could muster. "I'm putting through a rather big deal this afternoon, and I've got to work in cash."

He stopped at two other banks, where he had accounts in different names; and also at a safe-deposit, where his box yielded him a thick wad of various European currencies. When he had finished, his brief-case was bulging with more than sixty thousand pounds in negotiable cash.

He climbed back into his taxi and drove to his apartment near Baker Street. There would not be much time for packing, he reflected, studying his watch feverishly; but he must pick up his passport, and as many everyday necessities as he could cram into a valise in five minutes would be a help. The taxi stopped; and Mr. Journ opened the door and prepared to jump out; but before he could do so a man appeared at the opening and plunged in on top of him, practically throwing him back on to the seat. Sumner Journ's heart leaped sickeningly into his mouth; and then he recognised the dark piratical features of "Inspector Tombs."

"Whasser matter?" Journ got out hoarsely.

"You can't go in there," rapped the Saint. "Teal's on his way. Put the raid forward half an hour. They're looking for you." He opened the driver's partition. "South Kensington Station," he ordered. "And step on it!"

The taxi moved on again, and Mr. Journ stared wildly out of the

windows. A unifomed constable chanced to cross the street behind them towards his door. He sank back in terror; and Simon closed the partition and settled into the other corner.

"But what am I going to do?" quavered Journ. "My passport's in there!"

"It wouldn't be any use to you," said the Saint tersely. "We know you've got one, and we know what name it's in. They'll be watching for you at all the ports. You'd never get through."

"But where can I go?" Journ almost sobbed.

Simon lighted a cigarette and looked at him.

"Have you any more money?"

"Yes." Sumner Journ saw his companion's keen blue eyes fixed on the swollen brief-case which he was clutching on his knees, and added belatedly: "A little."

"You'll need a lot," said the Saint. "I've risked my job standing outside your apartment to catch you when you arrived, if you got there before Teal; and I didn't do it for nothing. Now listen. I've got a friend who does a bit of smuggling from the Continent with a private plane. He's got his own landing-grounds, here and in France. I've done him a few favors, the same as I've done for you already, and I can get him to take you to France—or farther, if you want to go. It's your only chance; and it'll cost you two thousand pounds."

Mr. Journ swallowed.

"All right," he gulped. "All right. I'll pay it."

"It's cheap at the price," said Inspector Tombs, and leaned forward to give further instructions to the driver.

Presently they turned into a mews off Queen's Gate. Simon paid off the cab, and asked the garage proprietor for the use of a telephone. He spoke a few cryptic words to his connection, and returned smiling.

"It's all fixed," he said. "Let's go."

There was a car waiting—a big cream and red speedster that looked as if it could pass anything else on the road and cost its owner a small fortune for the privilege. In a few moments Mr. Journ, still clutching his precious bag, found himself being whirled recklessly through the outskirts of London.

He released one hand from his bag to hold on to his hat, and submitted to the hurricane speed of the getaway in a kind of trance. The brilliant driving of his guide made no impression on his numbed brain, and even the route they took registered itself on his mind only subconsciously. His whole existence had passed into a sort of cyclonic nightmare which took away his breath and left a ghastly gnawing emptiness in his chest. The passage of time was merely a change in the positions of the hands of his watch, without any other significance.

And then, in the same deadened way, he became aware that the car had stopped, and the driver was getting out. They were in a narrow lane far from the main road, somewhere between Tring and Aylesbury.

"This is as far as we go, brother," said the Saint.

Mr. Journ levered himself stiffly out. There were open fields all around, partly hidden by the hedges which lined the lane.

Inspector Tombs was lighting another cigarette. "And now, dear old bird," he murmured, "you must pay your fare."

Sumner Journ nodded, and fumbled with the fastening of his case.

"But I don't mind taking it in the bag," Simon said quietly.

Mr. Journ looked up. There was a subtle implication in the way the words were said which struck a supernatural chill into his blood. And in the next second he knew why; for his lifting eyes looked straight into the muzzle of an automatic.

Slowly Mr. Journ's eyes dilated. He stopped breathing. A cold intangible hand closed round his heart in a vice-like grip; and the muscles of his face twitched spasmodically.

"But you can't do that!" he screamed suddenly. "You can't take it all!"

"That is a matter of opinion," said the Saint equably; and then, before Mr. Journ really knew what was happening, a strong brown hand had shot out and grasped the brief-case and twitched it out of Mr. Journ's desperate grip with a deft twist that was too quick for the eye to follow.

With a guttural gasp Sumner Journ lurched forward to tear it back, and found himself pushed away like a child.

"Now don't be silly," said the Saint. "I don't want to hurt you—much. You've lived like a prince for four years on the sucker crop, and a bloke like you can always think up a new racket. Don't take it so much to heart. Disguise yourself and make a fresh start. Shave off your moustache, and no one will recognize you."

"But what am I going to do?" Sumner Journ shrieked at him as he seated himself again in the car. "How am I going to get away?"

Simon stopped with his foot on the clutch.

"Bless my soul!" he said. "I almost forgot."

He dipped a long arm under the seat and brought up a small article which he pushed into Mr. Journ's trembling hands. Then the great car leapt away with a sudden roar from the exhaust, and Mr. Journ was left staring at his consolation prize with a face that had gone ashen grey.

It was a little toy airplane; and tied to it was a tag label on which was written:

With the compliments of the Saint.

the friendly murderer

by . . . Lawrence Treat

PATROLMAN HANNIGAN, on temporary plain clothes duty, was big, slow and stubborn. Even the way he put the phone down on his desk showed that he couldn't make up his mind about the call.

"That was a funny one," he remarked, frowning. "Wouldn't even give me his name."

Without looking up, Detective Marty Frisch said, "What?" He spoke with no particular interest. In a couple of weeks Hannigan would be out of here and Marty's regular partner would be back. So Marty said, "What?"

"This dame that sings," Hannigan said. "Like I was telling you about."

"Sure. She threw her boy friend over the cliff. Only you don't know whether she did. Or why."

"He was married, and maybe she was going to have his kid."

"Was she?"

"I don't know.

"Forget it," said Marty. "When it happened, she was sitting in a room with that little runt, they both say so. So how could she be out on the terrace while she was sitting in a room with the little runt?" Marty grinned with pride at his logic.

Distinguished mystery novelist Lawrence Treat, recently returned from his visit to the Far East, tells the story of a man who had, in his own gently ruthless way, created this world within which he moved—a satisfying and rather pleasant world which he was determined nothing could be allowed to menace, lest the pleasant moments depart . . .

"This tip I just got says the little runt's trying to protect her, and he wasn't with her, after all. Says if I go see her now and put on a little pressure, she'll confess."

"Those anonymous tips—malarkey," Marty said, bored. "Still, you got to go check up on 'em. What does the little guy do? I forget."

"Plays piano," said Hannigan, "or something." And he got up.

He wasn't quite accurate.

Reggie (born Charles Reginald III, to Social Register wealth that had dwindled) played the harpsichord. Because of his ability and his connections, he was able to organize a small, musical group that gave recitals of early music in the homes of prominent patrons.

Reggie, with a tuft of gray hair sprouting unaccountably from his otherwise barren scalp, looked like a rather elderly imp. His nose was short and uptilted, his face was round and his eyes twinkled like tiny sapphires. His laugh, quick and nervous, sent little tremors up and down his sixty-four inches of thin bones and soft, white tissues. On the whole, he was not impressive. But Julie Elsinor, soprano, was.

The group played trios (viola da gamba, oboe and harpsichord) and Bach chamber music that the audience tolerated, while waiting for the miracle of Julie. When she sang baroque songs to Reggie's accompaniment on the harpsichord, the audience gazed in rapture, and some of them even listened. As for Reggie, he lived those moments in a delicious, dream-like trance which he wished could last forever. But it did not.

Julie, being young, beautiful and brimming over with joy and vitality, fell in love frequently enough. Reggie didn't have a chance, and accepted the fact. To tell the truth, he was all in favor of a wealthy husband who would forward her career and perhaps finance the music group.

Julie, however, kept picking the wrong men. She seemed to gravitate towards suitors who planned to take her to the far corners of the earth. Like Raoul the Frenchman, who was killed by a fall under a subway train. Like Michael, an electrical contractor from Oregon, who started walking across an East River bridge one evening and never got to the other side. Like Albert Smith, who worked for an American firm in Brazil. But then, Albert was married, and presented no problem. At first.

He and Reggie struck up a friendship, and late one evening after they had left Julie's small apartment together, they stopped off for a drink. There, Albert confided some not unexpected news.

"I'm in love," he said, "with Julie."

Reggie gazed sorrowfully at Albert's strong, virile countenance. "Have you told her?" Reggie asked.

"How can I, when I'm married?"

Reggie experienced a deep, grateful contentment, as if the blessings of his parental wealth had descended on him again. "She likes you, too," he said. "Albert, it's too bad."

"I've written my wife and asked for a divorce," Albert said. "I'll know by next week."

Reggie giggled out of sheer nervousness, and the sense of being blessed departed abruptly. "You must tell me," he said. "I'd like to be the first to know."

If the remark was peculiar, Albert passed it by. "I'll be at the next performance," he said. "I'll tell you then."

"After the recital," Reggie said. "Any earlier might be disturbing. Particularly to her."

Albert assented.

The recital the following week was given in the Riverdale section of New York. The house, an imposing, chateau-like structure built on modern lines, overlooked the Hudson River. Immediately after the concert Julie went, as usual, to rest in the privacy of one of the rooms. Reggie, after signaling Albert to meet him, watched Julie retire. Then he stepped outside.

Albert was waiting on the narrow terrace built above the sheer cliffs that carried the foundations of the house. The drop was lethal. Opposite, the palisades of the Jersey shore loomed in their dark bulk. The lights of the George Washington bridge hung in a long, slender strand, and the waters of the Hudson flowed serenely, sparkling with the reflections of hundreds of lights.

"It's beautiful here," Albert said dreamily. "I'm waiting for Julie. I'm going to tell her I love her and want to marry her.'

"And your wife?" Reggie asked, studying both the man and the terrain.

"She's willing, under certain conditions. If Julie loves me, I know I can work it out."

"She does!" Reggie burst out. His heart overflowed with joy, and he patted Albert affectionately, testing Albert's balance and finding it solid. "I know she does. Albert—look, what's that down there?"

Albert leaned forward to look, and Reggie tipped him over quickly and expertly. It was a source of infinite satisfaction to him that Albert's last moments were so filled with hope.

Reggie slipped back unnoticed and went to Julie's room. He knocked before entering.

Julie was reclining on a couch. Her eyes were half-closed, and she'd barely touched the light highball that she'd asked for earlier.

"They have fancy bathrooms here," Reggie remarked, thus establishing a potential alibi. "Julie, you look tired. Anything wrong?

She gave Reggie a wan smile. "Everything," she said miserably. "I don't feel well, I have a cold coming on, and Albert wants to talk to me. Reggie, I'm just not up to it."

"Why? Is it such an ordeal?"

"Worse than that," she said. "It's about his divorce, and there are bound to be complications, even if he can get it. I'm too tired even to think. Get me out of it, can you? I don't care how."

"We'll leave right away."

"But I need an excuse, I can't simply walk out on him. Reggie, pretend you've been with me ever since my last number, that we had some trouble with it and were arguing and you wouldn't let me go. Anything at all, because I can't face him. Not tonight."

Reggie patted her hand. "You won't have to. I'll guarantee it."

"Oh!" she said, with relief. "What a weight off my shoulders!"

She and Reggie left together. To a couple of admirers who asked her where she'd been hiding, she said, "I was with Reggie." And, flashing her dazzling smile, she moved off.

The body of Albert Smith was discovered the next morning.

Reggie heard about it in a perfectly normal manner, over the radio, and in plenty of time to reassure Julie.

"The police will probably question you," he said, "but don't worry. Just keep saying I was with you from the end of the concert until everybody saw us leave. I'll stand by you, Julie."

"Thank you," she said in a low voice.

That should have settled the matter. But Hannigan, working out of the local precinct, was thorough in his methods and orthodox in his point of view. Like the dumb cop he was, he lacked the imagination to conceive of the hundreds of reasons explaining how a man could accidentally fall over a railing. Instead, Hannigan trudged all over New York and its suburbs and spoke to everyone on the guest list, as well as the performers. A dozen people coupled the names of Albert Smith and Julie.

There was nothing subtle about Hannigan. When he had an idea, he shared it.

"I'm not saying he was pushed," Hannigan confided to Reggie, "and I'm not saying he wasn't. But he was in good health, nothing wrong with his mind, either, so what made him fall, huh?"

"That," Reggie stated, "is something I know nothing about."

"Sure, but my job is to dig up what happened, and I just can't figure it."

"Did it ever occur to you that this was just a plain, ordinary accident?"

"That's what the lieutenant thinks," Hannigan said. "But me, I got to make sure. Now you know this Julie pretty well. Is she the emotional type?"

"Not particularly. Why?"

Hannigan scratched his head. "Just wondering how to go to work on her. Bang down hard, or wait

until she comes to me—which, huh?"

"You can't force her," Reggie said, "and she has nothing to tell. She was with me all the time."

"She didn't go to the bathroom?" Hannigan asked hopefully.

"No."

"People always go to the bathroom after their act," Hannigan said. "Nervous tension. My wife's brother, he plays in a band. He told me.

"Well, Julie didn't."

"What about you?" Hannigan said. "One of you must have. They always do."

Reggie shook his head in the negative, but he realized that a suspicion as illogical and as fixed as Hannigan's would have to be satisfied. And Julie, with her high principles and rigid moral code, would eventually tell the truth. Which would point a finger at Reggie.

"I'm sorry for you," he said to Hannigan. "You're really up against it, aren't you?"

"I got to find out who saw him."

"And if nobody did?"

For an instant, Hannigan looked as if all humanity had betrayed him. Then the cloud passed and he said, "Somebody did. But maybe I'll wait a little, with this Julie. I got other people to see."

When Reggie practiced on the harpsicord that evening, his fingers slipped, his touch was heavy, and he was not transported into the celestial fields of pure music. After a while he stopped, and he drummed three notes over and over again, with a quick rhythm.

Do-re-mi. Hannigan. *Do-re-mi—*

It is a mark of genius that the right idea always presents itself at the right time. Therefore Reggie, whose genius for murder had been amply proved, phoned Hannigan the next day, anonymously. Reggie called from a booth near Julie's address.

As on all previous occasions, he had an alibi prepared—he'd been home, practicing. To prove it, he'd left a window partly open, and near it his phonograph, set on repeat, was playing one of his own records. In addition, his tape recorder was winding away and picking up any unusual sounds, such as the ringing of a doorbell or a phone. And as for not answering, a dozen people knew that he never bothered, when he was engrossed in music.

Nevertheless he left the booth moodily, for he was fond of Julie and disliked making trouble for her. But as he crossed the street, his spirits lifted. As in a vision of gleaming intensity, he saw her standing trial for murder. She'd be sensational. The jury would melt at the sight of her and bring in a verdict of acquittal. The publicity would be enormous, her career would be made.

Which would do Reggie no good. She'd go on to fame and fortune,

and her small beginnings when she sang to his accompaniment would be a thing of the past. Sadly, he realized the extent of the sacrifice he had in mind. It meant he would lose her.

However, he had no choice. He had to protect himself against Hannigan and his inevitable suspicions.

Reggie sighed as he waited in front of Julie's apartment. It was a remodeled house, four stories high. Since most of the tenants worked, the building was probably deserted at this hour. But it didn't particularly matter. The point was that Julie would leave her apartment on the top floor at two-thirty p.m. and start out for her singing lesson. She'd press the button of the small elevator, which would come bumping and clanging to her floor. Then the door would open, and she'd see Hannigan.

Reggie licked his lips. In a way, he'd never taken quite such a chance before. It would have been simpler to kill Julie. Except that the police would suspect him at once. He knew her too well, was associated with her too closely. Besides, kill Julie, whom he worshiped? How could he?

He saw a bus pull up at the corner and he saw Hannigan step out. He moved clumsily, dragging too much weight with muscles that were too heavy. He should have been digging ditches or swinging a sledge hammer instead of traveling around a city and trying to think.

His mental processes were slow, and when he reached the doorway, he was still perplexed. "You?" he said to Reggie. "Was that you on the phone? Didn't sound like your voice."

"I didn't want it to. I was afraid you'd tell Julie I'd given her away, and then she'd hate me."

"But you're here now."

"I changed my mind. Besides, I have more to tell you."

"Yeah? Let's have it."

Reggie glanced at his watch. Julie was due to leave in ten or fifteen minutes. He'd checked the fact that she was home, but the chance that she might leave earlier sent him into a cold sweat.

He spoke jerkily. "After you went yesterday," he said, "my conscience bothered me, I kept worrying. Because you were right. I did go to the bathroom."

Hannigan nodded with satisfaction. "They all do."

"I saw Julie last night and said I had to tell the truth. She was upset, she pleaded with me not to. And then she confessed. Officer, she went out to the terrace and met Albert. She wanted him to divorce his wife and marry her, but there were complications. And then—they quarreled, and she pushed him. It's awful."

"Take it easy," Hannigan said. He led the way into the vestibule and studied the row of bell buttons. Reggie elbowed past him.

"You don't have to ring," he said.

"I have a key for the downstairs door."

"Look," Hannigan said. "You're not coming up. I want to see her alone."

"Let me go upstairs," Reggie said. "I'll wait in the hall, in case yout need me. I won't interfere."

"Well," Hannigan said doubtfully.

Reggie unlocked the front door and marched to the elevator. "I didn't sleep last night," he said. "I'm all shaky."

"What about?" Hannigan asked, with genuine curiosity.

"About everything. About Albert's being murdered. About my giving you the tip. Does anybody know?"

"Naah," said Hannigan, stepping into the elevator. "I just said I had a call and so I was coming up here and maybe she'd confess. What floor?"

Hannigan's bulk took up most of the small elevator. Reggie reached past him and pressed the button marked 4. His hand, crossing Hannigan's chest, brushed Hannigan's gun. Reggie seemed to lose his footing and his hat was flipped sideways. He fumbled for it, somehow rammed against the holster, then brought up his other hand and got it caught inside Hannigan's jacket.

"Sorry," Reggie said.

"What's the matter with you?" Hannigan grumbled.

"Nervous," Reggie said, as his fingers fastened on the gun. He jerked it out of the holster, cocked it and pressed the trigger. Hannigan's slow mind never quite grasped what Reggie was doing.

The sound of the shot was deafening. Hannigan's bulk slammed back, and he sagged heavily. Reggie fired again, to make sure. His ears rang from the blast and his senses went numb, and he shrank from looking at Hannigan's face. After a while Reggie realized that the elevator was no longer moving. Hannigan's body must have hit the *stop* button.

Reggie put the gun down on the floor. The sharp, acrid smell hurt his nostrils, and his ears still bothered him. The chances that the shot, so confined in space, had been heard elsewhere in the building were slight. He wondered at what floor the elevator had stopped.

He gritted his teeth and pushed at Hannigan's body, but two hundred pounds were too much for Reggie's strength, and he couldn't budge it. With considerable effort, he gradually inched the body to the corner of the elevator and clear of the indicators. Then Reggie pressed the number 4 button. Nothing happened.

He decided that the weight of the body had somehow jammed the mechanism, and he thanked all engineers for their foresight in installing the red, emergency button. He pushed it with confidence. Again, nothing happened.

Hannigan, he thought, clumsy in life and even clumsier in death. Couldn't he have departed gracefully, like Albert or Raoul?

Reggie, however, did not lose his head. There had to be a way out of this, and he'd find it.

He looked up at the ceiling of the elevator and saw the trap door, intended to be an escape hatch. But he could barely reach it and he knew that, even if he managed to slide it open, he could never chin himself up and haul himself through the opening. Beginning to feel panicky, he studied the bank of buttons. To his relief, he saw the trouble. Number 3 was stuck in the depressed position.

Cops carry pen knives, and Hannigan's was easy to locate. It had a strong, solid blade, and Reggie worked it underneath the number 3 button and pried. The plastic chipped off, showing a small, smooth, metal pin. He grasped it, but his fingers merely slipped. Frantically he began pushing buttons. The elevator did not react.

He glanced at Hannigan. The eyes were glassy and blank, and a trickle of blood stained the lips. In a sudden rage Reggie cursed him, then jumped up and down in a fury of frustration. But after the outburst, he calmed down and forced himself to think rationally. He had to wedge the door open; for a tool, he had the gun.

The rubber edge of the door gave readily, and through the slit he could see that the elevator was caught between two floors. The door, however, was under no pressure and did not move. Reggie put the gun down.

He looked at his watch. It was almost two-thirty. Julie would come out of her apartment in a few moments. Julie could rescue him. And then—

He glanced contemptuously at the dead cop. "Stupid," Reggie said, and spat.

But his mind functioned with a cold, clear brilliance. Julie could wedge the door open for him. He'd pretend to be afraid, pretend he couldn't get out, and he'd plead with her to climb into the elevator and help him. Once she was inside, he'd knock her out to give himself time to escape. The blow would be ascribed to her struggle with Hannigan, and the murder would come down to Reggie's word against Julie's.

A risky plan, but who in his right mind would believe Julie? The police knew that Hannigan had come here to accuse her. It was perfectly logical to suppose he'd arrested her and that, in the elevator, she'd managed to grab his gun and kill him.

Naturally enough she'd accuse Reggie, but he had no real worries. No one knew that he'd even spoken to Hannigan today. So—Reggie with no motive and a sturdy alibi, against Julie here on the scene and with good reason to kill Hannigan.

Reggie waited patiently.

He was in full command of his faculties when he heard, from somewhere above him, the slam of a door and the tap of heels. They approached, stopped directly above him. He heard light, confused sounds, as if someone was fussing over a stalled mechanism.

He coughed. Julie's voice called out immediately. "Is someone there?"

Reggie coughed again, disguised his voice and spoke in a rough, angry guttural. "I'm stuck," he explained. "The damn thing's stuck."

"Again?" she said. "It must be that Number Three button, it happens all the time and they can't seem to fix it. Whoever you are, please listen."

Reggie grunted to show he was paying attention. "Press Two and Down at the same time," she said, "and then Three will pop loose and the elevator will go down. But don't try Three again, it simply won't work."

"Thanks," said Reggie. He stamped his feet and tapped the side of the elevator as he spoke. The quality of his voice was muffled in other sounds, and Julie gave no sign of recognition.

Reggie obeyed her instructions. The elevator gave a jerk, the motor ground into action and, to Reggie's infinite relief, he found himself sinking slowly downwards. All he had to do was step out on the ground floor. Then Julie would send for the elevator, enter it and find Hannigan. And who would ever believe her story of the mysterious stranger she'd never even seen?

The elevator halted smoothly and Reggie pushed open the door to the main foyer. A few feet away, a cop in uniform was filling out some inspection forms. He held them against the wall with his back to Reggie, engrossed in his work.

Reggie sucked in his breath. His heart seemed to stop, his knees went weak and he stumbled awkwardly.

The cop turned around at once. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Something wrong?" His voice sounded anxious as he strode toward the open elevator and held out a helping hand.

NEXT MONTH—

To Simon Templar, the charity racket was one of the meanest in the book, no matter how it might be glamorized, as it was by

THE CHARITABLE COUNTESS

A SAINT STORY by LESLIE CHARTERIS

— in *THE SAINT MYSTERY MAGAZINE*

blood oath

by . . . Richard Deming

I HAVE, on a variety of occasions, seen Fausta Moreni exhibit strong emotions. I have seen her joyful, angry, loving and jealous. But never before that day had I seen her afraid.

It was more than mere fear. Her face registered almost stark terror when I opened her office door unexpectedly and she looked up to see who was entering. When she saw my face, relief flooded her own, which was an indication of her state of mind. Normally, while I do not exactly repulse people, the sight of my face does not inspire abandoned joy. In my youth a set of brass knuckles gave it a bent nose and one drooping eyelid, and even people as fond of me as Fausta are inclined to flinch when I come upon them unexpectedly.

Before I could even get the door closed Fausta was around the desk and clinging to me like a child seeking protection from a bully. Because of her Latin impulsiveness, it was not unusual for her to throw

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This was a new Fausta who faced Manny—a badly frightened woman who had just been handed her death sentence! He could do one of two things—he could turn on his heels and walk out of her life, ignoring all that she had meant and could still mean to him—or he could track down and fight these men who'd threatened to kill her.

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herself into my arms on sight, but usually, after planting one quick kiss on my chin, she would back off, examine me from narrowed eyes and lightly slap my face, as though I had been the aggressor. This time she merely clung.

Taking her by the shoulders, I pushed her away far enough to look down into her face. It was a lovely face. Though you usually expect Italian women to be dark, Fausta has vivid blonde hair in striking contrast to her brown eyes and coffee-with-cream complexion. Add perfect features, a form which would give goose bumps to an octogenarian, and you will begin to understand I had quite a woman by the shoulders.

I said, "What gives, baby?"

"Manny," she said. "Oh, Manny!" And she struggled to get back into my arms.

"Whoa!" I said, still holding her at arm's length. "What's all the excitement?"

She stopped struggling and just looked at me discouragedly. Then, with her shoulders sagging, she moved back to her desk. Opening a drawer, she removed a small sheet of paper and handed it to me.

The paper contained nothing but a drawing of a black hand.

Examining the sheet on both sides without growing any wiser, I finally handed it back.

"Nice likeness, if you care for pictures of hands," I said. "Is it supposed to mean something?"

Fausta collapsed in the chair behind her desk. "Just the Mafia," she said tonelessly. "It is their way of announcing a death sentence."

"The Mafia! That comic opera outfit?"

And I began to develop a slow burn. I knew something, though not a great deal, about the Mafia. I knew Sicilian bandits had originated it in the nineteenth century as an extortion racket, but when immigrants brought it to the United States it gradually underwent a change. Though its criminal members still often used it for extortion, it had spread to include thousands who were not criminals at all. Probably most of its members were law-abiding people, at least those who lived in America, but also most top racketeers of Italian descent belonged to the secret organization.

I also knew it operated under a ridiculous grammar-school sort of ritual which included blood oaths, passwords and idiotic warnings such as Fausta's black hand.

I said, "Maybe you'd better tell me the whole story."

It developed there was not much of a story to tell. The previous week two men had come into *El Patio,* Fausta's supper club, asked the head waiter to see her and been ushered back to her office. Neither gave a name, and she could describe them only as both dark, probably Italian, both of average build and both as well-dressed. She guessed them to be respectively

about twenty-five and thirty years old.

The older man did all the talking, Fausta said, and even he did very little. He simply announced that the Mafia from that day forward expected ten percent of *El Patio's* net profit, and said he or his companion would stop by once a week to pick it up.

As the most popular supper club in town, *El Patio's* net profit runs into nearly a quarter million a year. Hoping that the Mafia would settle for less than its original demand, Fausta placed only a hundred dollars in the envelope the younger man called for that morning. The result had been the black hand missive, which had come to her in a sealed envelope handed by some unidentified customer to one of her waiters.

"Why did you pay anything at all?" I asked. "Why didn't you phone the police?"

"Report the Mafia, Manny? Then surely they would kill me."

"They're only men," I said. "Not supernatural creatures. They fit into jail cells as easily as other men."

"You do not understand," she said hopelessly. *"No one* can fight the Mafia. Do you not know that even the great Enrico Caruso all his life paid ten percent of his earnings to the Mafia?"

"I've read that," I admitted. "But just because he was a sucker, you don't have to be."

At that moment the desk phone rang. Answering it, Fausta drew a deep breath and then just listened.

After a moment she said, "All right. Anything you say. This evening at seven." And slowly hung up.

"The Mafia again?" I asked.

Numbly she nodded. "I have another chance. My fee is five hundred dollars a week. They say they estimate the club's profit at five thousand, but it is not that high. They want to pick up the other four hundred for the first week at seven tonight."

Looking at my watch, I saw it was nearly one. "That gives me six hours," I said. "Get the envelope ready, and if you don't hear from me, pay off when they come. I may be back and I may not."

Coming around the desk, she laid a frightened hand on my arm. "What are you going to do, Manny?"

"Just poke around," I said.

"You will be killed, Manny. Please do not try to fight the Mafia."

I said, "I won't be killed, so stop jittering. Just do as I said."

She made another attempt to stop me by throwing her arms around my neck, but I simply pushed her away and walked out. I even forgot to tell her the reason I had dropped by was to ask her to go nightclubbing that night.

Normally if anyone told me about being blackmailed by the Mafia, I would advise calling the

police and let my responsibility end there whether the advice was taken or not, for as a private cop I have no responsibility to hunt down criminals unless a client engages me to do so. But Fausta Moreni is not just anyone. She is the girl I once wanted to marry, and though that is now a thing of the past for reasons which make another story, she is still pretty special to me. I had not let Fausta see it, but the fear in her face put me into a boiling rage. I had plans for her extortioners which would either get me dead, or convince them Fausta was a good person to steer clear of.

My first stop was at the office of my old friend, Inspector Warren Day of Homicide. As usual he raised his skinny bald head to peer at me over his glasses when I entered, and inquired when I was going to learn to knock before opening doors.

"When you start squandering your money on loose women," I told the tight-fisted old woman-hater. "What do you know about the Mafia, Inspector?"

He looked at me silently as I found a seat and reached for his cigar humidor. Automatically he moved it out of the way before I could raise the lid, forcing me to light one of my own cigars.

"What about the Mafia, Moon?"

"That was my question. What about it?"

He examined me curiously, finally said, "It's supposed to run the national crime syndicate. Or maybe vice versa. Aside from that I don't know anything about it."

"I don't mean nationally," I said. "I mean the local Mafia."

"There isn't any," he said flatly.

"You're certain?"

For a long time he just looked at me. Then he said, "Maybe there is some local stuff, but it's not the same bunch that's tied up with the syndicate. Maybe in a loose sort of way it's part of the same organization, but it doesn't function as a racket. You know how old-country people are. They stick together. They like their own people to settle disputes according to their own traditions instead of going into strange courts. A lot of Italians who never did anything criminal in their lives belong to the Mafia. The leaders act as sort of extra-legal judges to settle marital disputes and so on. I wouldn't be surprised to find the Mafia here, but I'll bet its members are all grocers and barbers and working men, not hoods."

"I see," I said, rising. "Thanks a lot, Inspector."

"Wait a minute, Moon. What's this all about?"

"Nothing. I seem to have been following a wrong lead. See you around, Inspector."

Having verified what I already suspected, that the police had no knowledge of the Mafia running its extortion racket in town, I realized I was going to have to stick my

neck out a little to gain information. My next move was to visit Rome Alley.

Rome Alley is the colloquial name for a five-block stretch of Columbus Street occupied almost entirely by restaurants, fruit stands and other small businesses run by Italians.

My plan of strategy was based on the knowledge that the Mafia's extortion racket is aimed solely at Italians. Though I have made no detailed study of the secret organization, I assume the reason for this is that the Mafia knows the chance of an Italian running to the police is much slimmer than if the Mafia indiscriminately picked on all nationalities. Practically from birth people of Italian descent, even third- and fourth-generation citizens, know what the Mafia is and have an inbred fear of it. They know its ruthlessness and they know what happens to Italians who refuse to pay the traditonal ten percent tribute. I was therefore fairly certain that if the organization was operating on any large scale, practically every small business along Rome Alley would be paying tribute.

I started at a small fruit store. It was empty when I entered, but the jangle of a bell attached to the screen door brought a luscious, olive-skinned woman in her late twenties from what seemed to be an apartment at the rear. She was a typical Italian beauty, plump and ripe and clean-smelling as fresh sheets. She wore a simple print house dress.

"'The boss around?" I asked her.

White teeth flashed in a smile. "I am the boss, mister. Mrs. Nina Cellini."

The "Mrs." made me glance at her left hand, which bore a plain gold band. It is uncommon among Italian families for anyone but the man of the house to be boss, and I must have looked surprised, for she grinned at my expression.

"I am a widow five years," she explained. "You selling something, mister?"

"No," I said. I moved my head toward the rear apartment. "Anyone else back there?"

She looked at me suspiciously, but after examining me again, apparently decided I wasn't a stickup artist. Suddenly a light of understanding dawned in her eyes. Moving from behind the counter, she came close and looked up at me with frank interest.

"You are in answer to the ad," she stated.

"Ad?" I asked.

Tilting her head first to one side and then the other, she studied me from head to foot.

"You are in good health?" she asked. "No physical defects?"

"I have a false right leg below the knee," I admitted. "Otherwise I'm pretty sound."

Her lips pursed and she lowered her gaze to stare dubiously at the

indicated limb. Since she seemed interested, I walked across the store and back again, just to show her I had no limp.

"It does not show and does not seem to inconvenience you," she decided. "You have two thousand dollars in the bank?"

Still at sea, I said, "About eighteen hundred, I think."

Her shoulders raised in a shrug. "For two hundred dollars I would not quibble. But the important thing is love."

She raised her eyebrows questioningly and I said, "Well, if you'd like a demonstration . . ."

Suddenly coy, she cast down her eyes and blushed a furious red. Then she slanted her gaze upward again and said in a conspiritorial voice, "Maybe one kiss. Just to see, I mean."

"Sure," I said agreeably, and immediately she moved into my arms.

I suspect we would still be glued together if I hadn't decided I needed air after about two minutes, for she gave no indication of ever wanting to end the kiss. I broke away by main force, retreated a step and wiped the lipstick from my mouth with a handkerchief.

"Did I pass?" I asked.

"I think, but it was really very short to tell."

She moved toward me tentatively and I retreated another step. Accepting defeat, she clasped her hands in front of her and again eyed me critically.

"I have three children," she said. "You like children, do you not?"

I decided that interesting as the conversation was, it was time to clarify things.

"Just who do you think I am? I asked.

She looked surprised. "You are in answer to the ad, are you not? My matrimonial ad."

Regretfully I shook my head. "I'm just here for the weekly tribute. The ten percent."

"Tribute? Ten percent?" She looked puzzled. "You are not in answer to the ad?"

"The Mafia tribute."

Her face had begun to develop an angry look, but the word "Mafia" changed her expression to startlement. "Mafia? I know nothing of the Mafia."

That was all I wanted to know. Tipping my hat, I walked out while she looked after me with an expression on her face which indicated she thought I was crazy.

Mrs. Nina Cellini's reaction was typical to what I encountered all along Rome Alley. Her reaction to the Mafia, I mean, for I didn't run into any more people who mistook my identity. I hit fifteen places of business in each announced I had come for the tribute, and in every one got nothing but uncomprehending looks. When I dropped the word "Mafia," the reaction was either startlement or guarded truculence, but nowhere did it seem to inspire fear.

It seemed that no one at all along Rome Alley was afraid of the Mafia.

Near the end of Rome Alley I came to a drug store and decided I might as well use it for my next move. When I asked the druggist if I could use his phone, he waved me to a lone booth at the back.

Turning to the yellow section of the phone book, I went down the restaurant list and picked out several first-class restaurants located outside of the Italian section, but which were run by people of Italian descent. I began to call them.

I hit the jackpot on the first try. Mr. Anthony Marizelli, proprietor of *Marizelli's Restaurant* over on the West Side, grew panic-stricken when I inquired about the tribute.

"It was paid!" he said. "The man picked it up yesterday. You cannot blame me if it was not turned in by your man. I swear on my mother's name it was paid!"

"Relax," I said. "I guess there's just been a mistake. See you next week." And I hung up.

Two more phone calls, with similar panic-stricken reactions from both restaurateurs, gave me the picture. The extortionists were carefully avoiding Rome Alley and hitting only Italians who owned big establishments and could pay off in a large way.

The first thing I noticed when I came out of the phone booth was the odd expression on the face of the druggist. He seemed so pointedly preoccupied with inspecting a shelf of toiletry supplies, I got the impression he was watching me out of the corner of his eye.

Sensing the strain in him, I swept my eye around the store. Two men had come in while I was in the phone booth. One sat at the soda counter puffing on a cigarette, but with no drink before him. The other idly glanced over the magazine rack. Neither paid any attention either to me or to each other.

Both were dark, muscular men of middle age and looked like they might be day laborers. After examining their cheap but serviceable suits and heavy work shoes, I decided they were just that, and I was letting the Mafia's reputation touch my imagination.

Neither so much as glanced after me when I walked out.

My walk along Rome Alley had left me four blocks from my Plymouth. During the walk back to it I glanced over my shoulder several times, but saw no sign of the two men.

However, I did experience a momentary feeling that I was being followed just before I reached the drive leading into *El Patio's* ground. In the rear-view mirror I glimpsed an ancient Dodge touring car about two cars back, and realized I had spotted it in the mirror twice before. When it drove on by as I turned into the drive, I decided it was my imagination again.

It was just six o'clock when I

turned my Plymouth over to a parking lot attendant.

Inside I told the head waiter not to disturb Fausta, and had him get me a table near the door leading back to Fausta's office. By a quarter of seven I had finished dinner, paid my check so that I wouldn't have that delay if I had to leave suddenly, and I spent the next fifteen minutes smoking a cigar and sipping a second cup of coffee.

At exactly seven the two men came into the dining room from the archway into the cocktail lounge. As Fausta had said, there was nothing particularly distinctive about either, unless you want to count a complete lack of facial expression. They were both dark, smooth-skinned men of average height and build, and both were dressed in expensively-tailored suits.

The older man, whom I judged to be about thirty, stopped in the archway and looked over the crowd with incurious eyes while the younger one made his way across the dining room. He passed within three feet of me and disappeared through the door into the back hall. In exactly three minutes by my watch he was back.

I was right behind the men when they went through *El Patio's* front door and handed their car claim check to the doorman. I gave him mine also. While we waited for our cars to come around, I paid no attention to them and they afforded me the same treatment.

My 1950 Plymouth arrived right behind their brand new Buick. Until the Buick passed between the stone pillars marking the entrance to *El Patio's* drive, I stayed within feet of its rear bumper. Then, making a mental note of the license number, I let the interval lengthen until I barely had it in sight.

Apparently the extortionists were so confident they had their victims completely cowed, they had no fear of being tailed. Not once glancing back, they crossed town at a moderate speed and parked in front of a rooming house on North Eighth Street. I pulled over to the curb a half block back, waited until they had entered the house and then sauntered past it.

The number, I noted, was 819 North Eighth. Pausing to touch flame to a fresh cigar, I glanced at the Buick out of the corner of my eye. The windows were rolled up. Quickly glancing at the house and seeing no evidence that I was observed, I checked the car doors and discovered they were locked. That probably meant they were through with the car for the night, I guessed, which in turn meant the rooming house was not just another shakedown call, but was home.

As that was all the information I wanted at the moment, I started back toward my Plymouth. But I only made it half way.

From a tree on one side of the walk and from a doorway on the other two shapes drifted toward me

in the gathering dusk. I was just raising my cigar to my lips, and by the time I had dropped it and started to reach for my armpit, it was too late. A gun barrel pressed into my right kidney.

"Straight ahead, mister," a soft voice said in my ear.

We took their car instead of my Plymouth, and it was the same ancient Dodge touring car I had spotted behind me just as I reached *El Patio*. When I discovered my captors were the same two men I had seen in the drug store, my ego took a drop. I like to think I am a hard person to tail, but apparently these two had been behind me ever since I left Rome Alley.

Relieving me of my P-38, they blindfolded me.

The ride was merely a long series of meaningless twists and turns to me. When we finally stopped, I had not the faintest idea where we were. They led me from the car, I heard a door open, and we went down some stairs into what, from the noticeably cooler temperature, I guessed to be a cellar.

Someone removed my wallet from my hip pocket. Apparently its contents were examined, for I heard a mumbled discussion among several men in which my name was mentioned twice. Then the wallet was returned to my pocket, I was pushed into a hard wooden chair and the blindfold was removed.

I was seated directly under a large-watt electric bulb which was shaded by a conical enameled shade such as you usually see over pool tables. This bathed me in bright light, but left the surrounding area in shadow. Blinking at the light, I could see nothing but the legs of the group of men surrounding me. There must have been at least fifteen.

Behind me an unnaturally deep voice with a strong Italian accent said, "We know from your papers you are a private detective named Manville Moon. Today you ask many questions about the Mafia, Mr. Moon. Now we like to ask you some."

I said, "Who are you?"

"You would know if you see me, Mr. Moon. I am one of the merchants you ask for tribute. I am also what you might call the leader."

I probed my mind to place the voice, but it was no use. Obviously its unnatural deepness was a disguise, and the man might have been any of a dozen restaurant owners, fruit dealers or barbers I had talked to that day.

"Hold out your left arm," the voice ordered.

When I obeyed, a shirt-sleeved man whose sleeves were rolled to his biceps stepped forward. The light shade hung even with his chest, so that even when he was within a foot of me, I could not see his face. Taking hold of my left arm, he shoved the sleeve back nearly to my elbow and examined the bare flesh.

Glancing at his own bare left forearm, I suddenly understood what he was looking for, because the underside of his bore a small scar in the shape of a cross. Vaguely I remembered somewhere acquiring the knowledge that part of the Mafia initiation ceremony is the gashing of the left forearm in that manner in order to let the blood which is supposed to seal the blood oath.

Dropping my arm, the man said, "He is not of the Mafia," and stepped back to take his place in the encircling ring.

"No, I'm not of the Mafia," I announced, deciding that if my captors were going to kill me, I might as well have the pleasure of telling them what I thought of their cloak and dagger outfit first. "I've just been checking up on your extortion racket. It must take a lot of bravery to belong to a secret gang which demands tribute from its own countrymen on the threat of death."

For a long time there was silence. Then the voice from behind me said, "I think you do not understand the Mafia, Mr. Moon. It is part of our way of life. It has been used for evil, but it is not in itself an evil thing. Here it is only an instrument of justice."

"Sure," I sneered. "The kind of justice that takes from the rich to give to the poor. The poor in this case being members of the Mafia. Who do you think you're kidding? I could name at least three of your fellow Italians you've been knocking down for tribute."

"Name them."

I managed a forced laugh. "And have them bumped off? No thanks. None of them squealed anyway. I ran across your racket by accident."

"You have proof?"

"Oh, come off it," I said irritably. "I tailed two of your pickup men only this evening. Matter of fact, your gunnies nailed me just after I'd run them to ground."

"You know the names of these men?"

"No," I admitted. "That was to be my next move. All I got was their address and the license number of their Buick. 819 North Eighth. License X-223740. But from that you ought to be able to figure out which of your pickup men I was on."

Again there was a long silence, then the leader behind me issued an order in such a low voice I failed to catch it. A moment later the blindfold was being refitted to my eyes.

Again I was taken for a long, winding ride in what I recognized from the wheeze of its motor as the same old Dodge touring car. When we stopped and the blindfold was removed, I discovered we were double parked next to my Plymouth and I was in the company of the same two middle-aged men who had originally picked me up. One of them handed me the clip to my P-38, told me to put it in my pocket,

and when I complied, gave me back my gun. I put it back under my arm.

Then he motioned me out of the car. As I stood in the street, staring at the two men without comprehension, they nodded impersonally and drove off. I noted the rear license was so coated with mud, it was indecipherable.

When I checked my wallet, I found the contents intact.

The whole thing was too much for me. I drove home and went to bed.

Next morning I was routed out of bed at eight o'clock by a phone call from Warren Day. "I want you at the morgue immediately," he growled.

"No thanks," I said. "I'm not dead yet."

"I'm in no mood for wise cracks, Moon!" he yelled. "You be at the morgue in thirty minutes, or I'll send the paddy wagon."

I got to the morgue in thirty minutes. Day was already waiting. Grunting a noncommittal greeting, he led me into the cold room and over to two sheet-covered figures on marble slabs. Both sheets he pulled back only far enough to disclose the faces.

Carefully I did not change expression when I recognized them as the two men I had tailed from *El Patio* to the rooming house on Eighth.

"What makes you think I know them?" I asked.

"You were asking me questions about the Mafia, and these are the first Mafia killings in this town in twenty years."

"How do you know they're Mafia killings?"

In answer he stripped the sheets all the way down. My stomach turned over when I saw the gaping holes in the chests of the two men.

Their hearts had been cut completely from the bodies.

Reaching over first one corpse and then the other, I raised the left arms and examined their under sides.

"These guys didn't belong to the Mafia," I said. "Mafia members all have a crossed scar on the left forearm."

I could have explained to the inspector right then and there what had happened, but I didn't see what it would accomplish. I doubted that he would even believe me.

In a definite tone I said, "I'm sorry I can't help you, Inspector, but I don't know who either of these men are."

I didn't in the sense that I didn't know their names, and there was nothing Warren Day could do about it but growl at me a bit and let me go. He would have growled even more had I told him the truth. For I realized I had condemned the two men to death.

Even now it is difficult for me to understand how a group of respectable Italian merchants could be so steeped in the traditions of the Ma-

fia that they would so ruthlessly avenge the misuse of the Mafia's name. None of the men who had ringed me the previous night had ever before committed a crime, I am now sure. Yet the blood oath, probably taken by some as long as twenty, or even forty years ago, held in the face of all other law.

I tried to visualize the mental processes of the honest barbers and restaurant owners and grocers as they reached one-by-one into a hat to withdraw a small ball, each hoping his would be white instead of black, but each steeled to perform his sworn duty if the lot fell his way.

I felt a little sick when I realized my experience of the night before had been in the nature of a trial, and if the local Mafia had decided that, on the evidence, I was using its name for extortion purposes, my own heart would now be separate from my body.

NEXT MONTH—

THE SPHERICAL GHOUL by FREDRIC BROWN

THE CHARITABLE COUNTESS by LESLIE CHARTERIS

THE LIBERTY OF THE SUBJECT by AVRAM DAVIDSON

BEZIQUE OF DEATH by VERONICA PARKER JOHNS

THE PURLOINED LETTER by EDGAR ALLAN POE

TEARS OF EVIL by CRAIG RICE

FLOWERS FROM THE DEAD by CORNELL WOOLRICH

and

DEATH AMONG THE GERANIUMS

A NEW STORY by WILLIAM O'FARRELL

—in the April issue of THE SAINT MYSTERY MAGAZINE

untouchable

by . . . Robert Bloch

This man was judging an ages old culture by his own standards—unaware of what could happen . . .

RACE WAS BORED with India.

"Nothing moves here, you know?" he griped. "Where's all the action?"

He gave everybody a hard time on location, and finally Simon took him on. Simon had always been able to handle him, and maybe that's why he was directing the picture; a lot of people just wouldn't work on a Race Harmon production any more.

"Look, sweetheart," he said. "I know it's been a drag. First the heat, then the rains, and then everybody coming down with the trots. Miller called me last night about the budget figures—the way he screamed, I could have heard him loud and clear from Bel Air without a phone."

"Let him suffer," Race muttered, then took a gulp of his drink. "I should bleed for him, shacked up in that air-conditioned office with the blonde throw-rug and a chick to match? Why doesn't he get off his butt and fly over here? We'll see how he likes being cooped up with a bunch of dumb niggers—"

Robert Bloch is the author of PSYCHO, the novel later made into the much-discussed film of the same name, and which gave rise to the subsequent legend—in a publicity release—that the author had the heart of a child—he kept it in a jar on his desk . . . Bloch is of course, in reality, a gentle and sensitive man, who simply knows the world whereof he writes—its weakness, its strength, and also its Race Harmons . . .

"Please!" Simon frowned. "That's one of the things I wanted to warn you about. They're *not* niggers. Why, some of those technical people we hired out of the studios down in Bombay could run rings around any crew in Hollywood. The trouble is, they hear you talking on the set and they resent your attitude. Just remember, you're not home now."

"You can say that again! Where I come from, we call a spade a spade, whether he wears shoes or not. And that's the way it's gonna be, so kindly lay off the jazz, huh?"

Race poured himself another drink.

"Another thing," Simon said. "Aren't you hitting the sauce a little hard lately?"

"Got to get my kicks somewhere, Pops. This is a nothing unit here, you know? When we came out, I thought I had it made with Gladys, only she's got eyes for that Method swish, that Parker. So I gave a little play to this script-girl of yours, Edna what's-her-name—"

"Messy." Simon sighed. "You didn't have to break into her trailer."

"All right, she made a federal case out of it." Race emptied his glass and thumped it down. "What am I supposed to do for some action? I'm hurting bad."

"Control yourself. We'll wrap up our location shots and be out of here in two weeks."

"Two weeks? Look, Dad, this is Race Harmon you're talking to, not Barry Fitzgerald. I may have to make the scene with some of that dark meat. Noticed all these chicks in the sarongs, or *saris,* whatever you call 'em, parading down by the river. Why I spotted one yesterday, she couldn't be a day over fifteen, but she had a pair of—"

"Race, that's murder!" Simon shook his head. "I saw you talking to that girl, and so did everyone else. You're lucky you left it at that —one false move and there'd have been a riot. I only hope they didn't hear about it up at the palace."

"So what?"

"Can't you understand? These people are *not* ignorant savages. You've met the Maharajah; he's an intelligent man. If you want me to lay it on the line, I think he's a damned sight more civilized than you are."

"He's a nigger."

"Well, you'd better not make any such statements tonight," Simon said. "Don't forget, we're invited to the palace for dinner."

"I'll eat here."

"You'll come to the palace." Simon's voice was firm. "It's important, Race. We're guests here in the Maharajah's territory. We've rented his land, hired his people. We can't afford to offend him. I want you to show up sober and on your best behavior. Is that clear?"

"I dig you, Pops." Race waved his glass. "Okle-dokle, it's a take. Who knows? Maybe he'll give us a

little of that old Southern hospitality—"

His Highness' hospitality was lavish and unmistakable. There were twenty at table, including Race, Simon, and the principals of the cast. The only representative of the household was a bearded Sikh introduced as his major-domo.

"Actually, Singh commanded the palace guard," the ruler explained. "But since I am no longer the official ruler of this territory, he too has been deposed. We have bowed to progress, or at least, to governmental decree."

"They took away your title, huh?" Race paused and emptied his champagne-glass for the fourth time since starting dinner. "I suppose they got to your harem, too."

"Harem? But I am not a Moslem, my dear fellow."

The Maharajah was plump, middle-aged, bespectacled, and he wore a conservative grey tweed suit. But his complexion was unmistakably swarthy, and people with unmistakably swarthy complexions didn't go around calling Race Harmon "my dear fellow". Even if they *did* serve damned good champagne.

"Come off it!" he said, holding out his glass for a re-fill. "Everybody knows you rajahs have a ball. I'll bet the joint is full of—whaddya call 'em?—concubines. Yeah, concubines. That's the bit."

"Sorry. I'm afraid I can't oblige you, Mr. Harmon."

"Never mind the double-talk," Race told him. "Bring on the dancing-girls!"

"Devadasi? But they are confined to their temples."

"So take me to your temple!" Race laughed, then broke off as he realized none of the others were joining in.

Their host stared at an imaginary spot on the table-linen before him. "Perhaps it would be wise, Mr. Harmon, if I explained the customs of my country. Nonbelievers are not welcomed in our places of worship. There is a certain—prejudice, shall we say? You see, there is still ignorance amongst my people. They even resent the notion of a stranger making approaches to an untouchable such as the water-carriers in the village. It would be most embarrassing if an outsider were to exhibit any—any—"

"So you heard about that, eh?" Race waved his glass. "I get the message. Hands off, is that it? Yankee, go home!"

"Please, Mr. Harmon—"

"Never mind. You heard about old Race, huh? That's why you locked up the harem."

"I assure you, I have only one wife. At the moment she happens to be in Chandigarh."

Race grinned. "Sure, sure! Well let me tell you something. Nobody upstages me. And if I want a little poontang, I'm gonna get it, understand?"

"Poontang?"

"What's the matter, don't you niggers understand plain English?" Race stood up, ignoring Simon's frantic gestures. "Ah, forget it. Where's the head?"

The Maharajah glanced at his major-domo. Race watched them, fuzzily alert for any indication of anger. That's what he was waiting for; just let the nigger blow his top and he'd *really* let him have it.

But there was no anger, merely a quiet exchange of glances and a nod. Then the bearded Sikh rose and gestured politely, and Race followed him out of the room and down a long, dim corridor.

For a moment there was silence in the dining-hall behind; then everybody started talking at the same time.

Covering up, Race thought. *The civilized bit.* Well, if they wanted to be polite to niggers, that was their business. He knew what *he* wanted to do. What had that snotty spade said about his wife? She was in Chandigarh, whatever the hell that was. And damned lucky, too, because right now, if he could find her—

"Here we are, sir." The bearded man bowed and stepped aside. Race entered a modern bathroom.

Three minutes later he stood before the mirror, shaking the cold water out of his eyes and towelling off his face. He'd sobered somewhat, just enough to feel a sneaking distaste about rejoining the others in the banquet hall. Maybe the best idea was to just cut out of here.

He stepped into the deserted hall, moving slowly past a row of closed doors. That is, they had all been closed when he'd followed the major-domo. Now one of them was slightly ajar. As he passed he was aware of a heavy, musky scent drifting into the corridor.

Race halted and peered into a darkened room. Moonlight filtered from barred windows. Beneath the windows was a couch. On the couch was a girl. Her sole garment was a *sari* and she wore no ornaments, but such artifices were unnecessary. She was young and lovely, and when she rose in wide-eyed wonder the *sari's* transparency disclosed an undulating outline in the moonlight.

"Hot damn!" Race muttered, as he stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

"Sir—"

The girl moved back towards the couch.

"Sir—"

Race grinned and reached for her.

"Please, sir—it is not permitted. I am untouchable—"

Her knees pressed against the couch and she fell. Race held her there, his hands ripping the soft silk, feeling the incredible warmth of the body beneath. For a moment she writhed in resistance, until his lips found the fiery crater of her mouth, its tongue erupting like molten lava.

"Untouchable, huh, baby?" Race

whispered. "Well, we'll see about that—"

He left her sobbing, without a word. What the hell was there to say? He knew she wouldn't talk, and neither would he. If anybody back at the banquet hall asked where he'd been so long, he'd tell them he got sick, heaved his cookies. Nobody would ask any questions.

But sometime, just before they pulled out of here for good, he'd find a way of letting the big shot know what happened. That uppity nigger thought he was so damned smart, handing out a line of jazz about keeping his hands off all the chicks. It would be a real gasser to see his face when he found out somebody had scored with his wife.

Well, he'd played it cute, but Race had the last laugh. It was all he could do to keep from busting out right now when he walked back into the banquet scene.

He got a real break because nobody even seemed to notice when he came in. They were all standing around some guy in a white suit at the head of the table.

Then the Maharajah looked up and saw him.

"Feeling better, Mr. Harmon?" he asked.

Race nodded, trying to hold back the grin.

"That is good. But if you felt ill, you could consult with Dr. Ghopura here."

Race blinked. "You called a doctor for me?"

"No—it just so happened that he arrived a few moments ago. I asked him to fly in from Bombay."

"It is useless, of course," the little doctor said. "If what you told me is true, the patient will surely die. All I can hope to do is ease the suffering in the terminal phase. I only pray you have kept her isolated."

"Wait a minute!" Race's throat was dry. "Your wife—she's sick—?"

"My wife is in Chandigarh, Mr. Harmon. We are speaking about a poor untouchable from the village whom I discovered the other day. I brought her here immediately to avoid panic and the spread of contagion, for the disease is invariably fatal."

"What disease?"

"Cholera."

The other shrugged and turned away. "Doctor, if you will come with me, please? Her room is right down the hall—"

Everything started to whirl. Just before he fell, Race thought he saw the Maharajah exchange a smile with his major-domo, but he could not be sure. All he was sure of was the pain flooding his head and throat. It was a hot pain—hot and throbbing, like the mouth and tongue of the untouchable.

the glass needle

by . . . A. N. Glennon

Tom Flynn shouldered his way through the crowd at the rear of the barroom. Ahead of him, his two Shore Patrolmen tried to clear the way, but their shouts of "Gangway!" were wasted. The men were too closely packed; too intent on the washroom door, to pay any attention to the Shore Patrol. Flynn's two and a half stripes were usually enough to carry him through a crowd of sailors without any difficulty, but this crowd was different. Awed in the presence of death, they were indifferent to rank.

A Key West Policeman guarded the entrance to the washroom. He raised his arm to block Flynn's entry, lowered it when he spotted the SP arm band. He jerked his thumb toward the door.

"In there, if you can squeeze in, Commander," he said. His look at Tom's football-player physique implied doubt that there would be room for Tom.

It was a tight squeeze, and Tom wondered whether it was worth it. The washroom stank of stale beer, vomit, and urine. Through the haze, he could tell this was no different from the washroom in any

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We have raised the possibility elsewhere that Commander Flynn is the nearest thing to a new type of detective that we've come across in recent years, and there have as yet been no protests from greying aficionados of the genre in the wastelands pointing out that so-and-so used such a detective in his series published in the Twenties. . . .

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other local bar: dirty and smelly, with unflushed bowls and urinals, muddy water fouling the floor; above all, that nauseating smell.

Fighting back at his stomach, which was doing flip-flops, Tom saw that this washroom was different in one respect: crumpled in a corner between the washbasin and the wall, a young sailor lay on his side with his back to the room. His face, awash in the mess on the floor, was a foot from the urinal. He didn't mind; staring at the drain with sightless eyes, he no longer cared what indignities were heaped upon him. He couldn't mind; he was dead, still clutching with both hands at the knife protruding from his heart.

Death alone didn't usually bother Flynn, but in combination with this smell and filth it hit him hard. The sailor's whites had probably been inspection-clean when he left his ship that evening, but they had taken up samples of everything on the floor during his final struggles. Flies buzzed eagerly about the room, and a few cockroaches skittered on the floor, expertly dodging the feet which trampled near them.

Flynn choked and swallowed. Despite his rugged appearance, Tom's stomach was sensitive, had been for all his thirty three years. This scene, hitting eyes and nose together, was almost too much for him. Looking around, he spotted Lieutenant Castro, of the local police.

"What's the story, Pete?"

Castro saw how Tom was feeling. "Come on outside," he suggested, "we'll be able to talk better."

As Tom turned to leave, his shoe made a grating sound on the tiles, setting his nerves further on edge. It reminded him of the way the kids at school used to scratch the blackboard to tease the teacher.

Flynn and the Lieutenant picked out a table near the bar. Tom removed his cap and wiped his face with a clean handkerchief. He smiled ruefully at the Lieutenant. "Wish I could have a drink after that, but the Patrol can't drink on duty." He watched the crowd leaving the washroom so the photographers could get in, then turned back to his companion.

"There's not much to go on yet," Castro said. "You got here right behind us. All we know so far is that this sailor was off a local Destroyer, and came in with a bunch of men from his ship. They had a few drinks, then someone noticed he wasn't at the bar any more. He'd complained of being sick earlier, so they looked in the washroom for him. You saw for yourself the way they found him."

The Police, assisted by Flynn's Shore Patrolmen, were breaking up the crowd around the washroom, seating the bystanders at the bar, where they could be kept under watch easily. The crowd, Flynn now saw, had been composed of only fifteen or twenty men. Packed together, they seemed like more.

Stretcher bearers stood just outside the washroom door, waiting for their turn to enter, while the photographers and lab men worked inside. The stretcher bearers weren't in any hurry. Their patient had no urgent needs; he wouldn't leave until they were ready to take him.

Tom looked back to the Lieutenant. "You know I don't have any real status here, except as an observer for the Navy. Since I'll have to make out a report investigating the death, though, I'd like to sit in on your investigation."

"Glad to have you, Tom. You may be able to help out a little when I'm talking to the sailors. It always helps to have an officer around, for some reason." Castro opened his notebook and held it up to the light to find a blank page.

Tom looked around the room to get oriented. The light was so dim he couldn't decide at first whether he could see the whole room or not. As near as he could tell, it was about thirty feet deep and forty wide. He could see shapes, but people weren't recognizable as individuals more than ten feet away. The only lights in the place were colored; red and blue, they were probably twenty-five watters.

The street side of the room was a solid wall, unbroken except for the entrance, a pair of sturdy wooden doors. When the place was open, these doors were swung back out of the way, and a black curtain served in place of a door. Now, the wooden doors were shut, to keep out the curious.

Halfway to the back of the room was a small rectangular stage raised a foot or so above floor level. The stage, about ten feet square, was set against the left-hand wall, looking from the door. A bar ran the length of the room to the right of the entrance. At the far end of the bar, in the rear wall of the room, were the entrances to the washrooms, while to their left was a curtained doorway leading, Tom figured, to an offstage dressing room. A dim white light showing through the curtains at the back of the stage indicated his guess was probably correct. Tables were located on the floor space not taken up by the bar and the stage; the ceiling was lower over the tables in the back than in the rest of the room. Darkness was almost complete in this section.

"Alfredo," called the Lieutenant, "can't we have a little more light over here?"

A dark, heavyset man appeared out of the gloom. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant, but all the lights are on." He shrugged; his eyes, deepset in fat, squinted at them through the smoke. "You know, Lieutenant, the girls don't like too much light when they do their acts."

"Yeah, Gomez, I know. What sort of acts do they do over here at these tables, they need it so dark?" Castro paused without expecting an answer. "Okay, if this is as much light as we can have, we'll get

along." He turned to Tom. "Let's move this table a little, so we can at least see who we're talking to."

The proprietor waddled off again, to resume his station on a high stool near the door. Though the place was closed, the stool was apparently such a habit with him that he returned to it automatically. Lieutenant Castro leaned back, to set the scene for Tom. "So far as we can tell, no one has come in or left since the murder, except for the police and your Shore Patrol. Gomez, the owner of the place, says he locked the doors as soon as the body was discovered, and he didn't see anyone come or go for something like half an hour before the discovery. We'll have to assume that we've got the whole crowd here."

Flynn frowned. "Aren't there any other entrances to this place?"

"Nope, just the front door. They use it for a service entrance during the day. And Gomez sits there all night, every night. He makes a pretty good watchman. Nothing distracts him; doesn't smoke, drink, or watch the show. Just checks identification on everyone coming in who might be a minor, and collects all the money when they close." Castro placed his elbows on the table, laced long, slender fingers together. "Might as well get started," he said.

He looked around the room, the faint, colored lights glinting off his sleek hair. Three sailors, looking anxiously about them, were grouped separately from the rest at the washroom end of the bar. They were close enough together to be guarded by two policemen, but too far apart to talk to one another. Castro beckoned to one of the guards, who came over, leading a sailor.

The man was worried. His face lit with hope when he saw Tom. "Gee, Commander," he blurted out, "I didn't have nothing to do with this. Please, sir, tell these cops I'm okay."

Castro's nostrils twitched at the word "cops", but he said nothing.

Flynn looked at the man without recognition, and shook his head. "I don't know you're okay, sailor, any more than the police do. I'm just a spectator here. You do what the Lieutenant tells you, answer all the questions, and if you're clear, he'll know it. I'll see that no one violates your rights, but I'd advise you to tell everything you know that'll help the police."

"Thanks, Commander," Castro said, and turned to the sailor. "Now, let's have your story."

"Well, we all came over tonight, to sort of celebrate payday. You know how it is, Commander, on payday." Tom nodded, in spite of himself. "Bill and Bert wanted to come here, to see Aida, so Doc and I came along. Doc brought us over, in his Jaguar. He's got one of the big ones, the four door model."

Raising his hand, Castro stopped the sailor. "Wait a minute; let's go back a little. Who are you, who's

Bill, Bert and Doc, and who's Aida?"

"Oh, yeah. Well, okay. I'm Ed Gregory. I'm on the Shubrick, along with Bill Wells, he's the one who got killed. Bert; that's Bert Hawes, and Doc is Doc Mason. We're all off the Shubrick. We buddy around a lot, being all in the same watch section. Aida's one of the strippers here. Bill and Bert have gotten sort of friendly with her, and they come over here all the time."

"Just the four of you come together?"

"Yeah, that's right, four of us. We weren't going to stay too long, 'cause Bill felt sort of sick. He looked sick, too, sort of pale and jumpy. He didn't want to go to sick bay with Doc, said he'd feel better after we'd been here a while."

"Where did you go before you came here?"

"No place. We came here straight from the ship."

"Wells have any enemies?"

"No, sir, not so far as I knew. He was always pretty friendly with all the guys on the ship. Never heard anyone say anything against him. He was funny, went off by himself a lot, but he was always okay around the gang."

"Know whether he owed anybody any money?"

"I don't think so, except for twenty or so he owed Bert Hawes. I heard Bert asking him for it a few times."

"Who found Wells in the washroom?"

"That was me, Lieutenant. We was all watching the strippers, and not paying any attention to each other. When Aida come on, Bert and Bill usually made a lot of noise, to sort of let her know they was there. I heart Bert, and turned to see why Bill was so quiet. I didn't hear him, and he'd been sitting right next to me. He wasn't there, so I asked around to see where he was. Nobody remembered seeing him for a while, so I went into the head, to see if he'd gotten sicker. I found him, and shouted out for somebody to call a doctor. The manager came right in and said Bill was dead. He locked up the place right away, and called the police."

"Wells sat right next to you, and you didn't notice him leave?"

"Aw, Lieutenant; who wants to look at another sailor, when some dame's stripping up there on the stage?"

"Do you know for sure that he was even sitting next to you?"

"Sure. Why, hell, his glass is still right next to mine, over there on the bar."

"Okay, Gregory, that'll be enough for a while. You go back over there, and have the policeman send Mason over. Don't try to go anywhere until we tell you you can leave. We may want to call you back later." The Lieutenant waved his hand in dismissal.

Flynn and Castro looked at each

other. Castò shrugged. "Didn't get much from him," he said. "Hell of a place to get knocked off in, isn't it?"

Tom was nodding his agreement when a tall, red-headed sailor dressed in a spotless, tailor-made white uniform sat down at their table. "You want to talk with me?" he asked.

"You're Mason?"

"That's right. Fanton Mason, Hospitalman First Class, off USS Shubrick. Uh, listen, Commander, you won't let it get out that my name's Fanton will you? I mean, I'm sort of used to being called Doc, and I'd sort of hate to go back to being called Fannie."

Castro frowned at the man, his brows almost meeting over his nose. "Mason, we've got a lot more to worry about than what they call you. If that's all that's bothering you right now, your buddies are liable to think of something worse than Fannie to call you. Now, tell me about tonight."

Mason sat back sheepishly. "Sorry; I just feel a little sensitive about it." He pulled out a silver cigarette case. "Mind if I smoke?"

"Go ahead." Castro waved his permission.

Mason's story parallelled Gregory's. So far as he knew, Wells had been well-liked aboard ship, in spite of his periods of solitude. He and Hawes had been in competition over Aida who, so far, had shown no favoritism toward either one. Each had bragged to the other about his own evenings with Aida. Wells owed Hawes about twenty dollars, lost in a poker game. Hawes had been heard to ask for it several times, but Wells had kept putting it off, saying he had more urgent debts.

"Did Wells and Hawes ever argue over Aida?"

"Well, Wells had met her first, and he was sort of unhappy that Hawes was trying to move in, but I never heard any real arguments about it."

"Where were you sitting tonight?" asked Castro.

Mason hesitate before replying. "I was between Gregory and Hawes."

"Were both of them there all the time?"

"I think so. No, wait a minute; just a few minutes before Aida was due to come on, Hawes left for a minute or two. Said something about getting some cigarettes. He was back in time to catch Aida's number."

"Was Wells sitting at the bar at that time?"

"I don't know. He'd been sitting on the other side of Gregory, I think, and I was watching the stage most of the time. I didn't keep taking muster all night. I suppose he wasn't there, because Gregory went looking for him just a little later."

Mason returned to the bar, while Flynn and Castro thought over what they'd heard so far. "Getting

any indications, Lieutenant?" Flynn asked.

"Just ideas," was the reply. "I think we'd better see if we can't get a few more facts before we jump to any conclusions." He raised his head and looked over toward the street door. "Alfredo, come over here, will you?"

The fat proprietor grunted as he climbed off the stool and lumbered over to the table. He sat down, and his jowls shook as he plopped his elbows onto the table. He glanced questioningly from one to the other.

"What can I tell you of this thing, gentlemen?" He shrugged, expressing his complete ignorance. "I was sitting on my stool all night. The first thing I knew about it was when that sailor called out from the washroom. I went in and saw the other sailor was dead, and called you."

"Did you see anyone go into the washroom?"

The owner's lips wrinkled loosely into a sloppy grin. "Lieutenant, you complained of the lighting here, yourself. Even if I had seen anyone go in there, how could I be sure who it was?"

Castro sighed. "Did you see anyone go in there, Gomez?"

"All right. Yes, I did see someone go in. The light shines out when the door is opened, and attracts my attention. When Carmela was on, just at the start of her act, a sailor went in. A minute or two later another sailor went in. One of them came out. Then another sailor went in, just after Aida started her act. He was the one who shouted."

"You couldn't identify the second sailor?"

"In this light? I told you the girls don't like too much light for their routines." A lecherous smile rippled over his lips. "They're not modest. It's just that, in dim light, they look better."

"Well, could you tell what part of the bar these sailors came from?"

"They could have all come from the same group; those sailors sitting back toward the rear of the bar."

Flynn entered a question of his own. "Mr. Gomez, do you sit up front all night? Don't you ever wander around to see how things are going? Sort of keep an eye on the customers?"

"No, Commander, I have to stick close to the door, checking Identification Cards. Most of my customers are sailors, and about half of those who try to come in are under age. I don't intend to lose my license. Besides, if I wandered around, my customers might object. I don't worry about what the customers are doing, you understand, unless they're making trouble."

"You didn't leave your stool all night?" Flynn asked.

"Not until I had to go back and see what the trouble was. And I had one of the bartenders take the door when I went."

Castro nodded, and Gomez re-

turned to his stool. While he was climbing back onto his perch, the stretcher bearers were passing the investigators' table. Castro stopped them, pulled down the blanket which covered the body. The boy had been stripped, but no attempt had been made to clean him. The face, unnaturally pale, was still as it had been on the washroom floor.

"Put his things on this table," Castro directed the policeman who was carrying the bundle. "We'll make a preliminary check here."

He pulled the blanket down further, revealing the butchered chest, as well as several tiny, scabbed-over scars on the insides of the victim's elbows.

"Looks as if he had a case of coral rash," he observed, and pulled the blanket back into position.

Sending the stretcher bearers on, Castro unwrapped the dead man's jumper and looked at the few pieces of personal equipment the youth had been carrying. Flynn's eye was caught by the knife, already tagged for identification. He picked it up by the tag, and let it dangle before his eyes.

"It's all right to handle it, Commander," said the officer who had been carrying the possessions. "It's already been checked for prints. It was wiped clean."

Tom turned it over and over in his hand. Closed, it was about nine inches long. He found the release button and pushed it. The blade leaped into position so fast, he didn't see it move. It tapered to a needle point, and Tom shuddered as the lights flickered on its carefully honed edge. The imitation horn handle nestled comfortably in his hand. This was a knife which, when opened, demanded to be used. On the handle was a small engraved plate, shield-shaped. Holding it up to the light to see better, Tom made out the initials, "W. W."

"Looks as if he was killed with his own knife," he said. "If this was his, Wells had the makings of a first-class delinquent."

"We ought to be able to check ownership easily," Castro replied. Taking the knife from Tom, he walked over to the three sailors who had been with Wells. After a short conference, he returned. "It's his, all right. They say he kept it in a locker aboard the ship, and sharpened it every day." He looked at it thoughtfully. "Funny, isn't it? This sort of knife has just one purpose. And, so far as we know, the first time this one got used for its intended purpose, it was on the guy who'd given it such tender care."

Almost as an afterthought, Castro added, "They also explained those scars on his arms. Mason said Wells always made a big point about scratching himself before he closed it. He'd read somewhere about an old Arab custom of never unsheathing a fine blade without shedding some blood. Claimed his own blood would do until he found a real use for the knife."

Castro set the knife down on the table. "Let's check the rest of his things, see if we can find out anything." He opened the wallet. There was the usual collection of cards and pictures, and some money. "Here's two brand-new twenties, and a couple of worn dollar bills. Today was payday, they said?"

Flynn nodded. "The twenties are probably from the paymaster, and the singles most likely from his change at the bar. Wonder how much he drew today?"

Castro returned to the three men from the Shubrick. After speaking with each one alone, he came back over to Tom. "None of them knew for sure, but they thought he had mentioned drawing sixty or sixty-five dollars. If we allow for a few beers, it must have been sixty-five, and he's twenty dollars short. The only place he could have gotten rid of that twenty is right here; we ought to be able to find out what happened to it."

"Yes," agreed Flynn, "when a paymaster pays in new bills, they're all in serial number order. If it was spent here, all you have to do to find it is check serial numbers." Tom rubbed his hand over his crew-cut brown hair. "If Wells paid off the twenty he owed Hawes, we'd have the simplest explanation of the shortage, and it might help clear Hawes."

"We'll ask Hawes later," Castro replied, "but remember, without Wells to verify, we won't know whether it was paid back, or taken back. Right now, I want to check a few more stories. Hawes looks like our best subject, but there's something missing. Sailors don't usually kill each other over twenty dollars, and they don't often kill over women like Aida. If she's like most of the ones you find in this sort of joint, neither Wells nor Hawes would have been worried about any sort of exclusive arrangement with Aida. More than likely, she was just something to talk about, but nothing to get serious over."

Flynn was doubtful. "Lieutenant, regardless of how trivial it may seem to you and I, something like that could have gotten Wells steamed up. The switch-blade knife and the old Arab custom indicate he was immature, and hadn't gotten over his adolescent romantic ideas. If he thought he had prior rights with Aida, he might just get belligerent enough after a few bottles of beer to pick a fight with Hawes; particularly if Hawes picked the wrong moment to ask again about his twenty. In a fight where one man's got a big knife, one of the two is going to get hurt."

Castro nodded thoughtfully. "You may have something there; let's see what Aida has to say."

Aida swaggered over to the table, glorying in her unfamiliar role of femme fatale. Close up, she wasn't the type. Her face was heavily painted to give a youthful appearance, but no amount of makeup could

conceal the results of the normal wear and tear of her professional life. Her hair, nearly black, hung loose, and swung across her shoulders as she walked. She sat, folding her arms on the table, and unconsciously rubbing the inside of her elbows.

"Gee, Lieutenant, I never thought Bert would kill Bill over me. I knew they both liked me, but I didn't think it was this serious. Sure, Bill kept trying to get me to quit seeing Bert, but I just kept stringing both of them along, not paying too much attention to either one of them. Golly, even if I'd wanted to, I couldn't have gotten serious with Bill."

"Why not, Aida?"

"Well, you know, Lieutenant, a girl's got to make a living. I'm the star, here, but if I tried to pair off with any of the customers, seriouslike, I'd lose top billing; maybe even my job. I could give them each a few hours a week, but I've got to look out for the future."

"What do you mean by that, Aida?"

"Aw, Lieutenant, I don't have to explain *that,* do I? Can't you figure out how I stay on top here?"

Castro, understanding, nodded. "Gomez know you were playing those sailors?"

"Lieutenant, what a question! Of course he knew. But he's not jealous, as long as his pocketbook's being fattened. How do you suppose he keeps this place going? You don't think twenty or thirty beer-drinking customers a night are enough to pay eight girls and two bartenders, plus the rent and something for himself, do you? Sure, some of the beer-drinkers buy us a drink or two, at five bucks a drink, and that helps. But he lets us pick up a little more outside, as long as he gets a cut of it. If we go out during business hours, we kick back a flat three dollars an hour to him for every hour we're gone. Long as we put up the dough, he never bothers about what we're doing while we're out, or how much we make."

Even under the colored lights, the Lieutenant's face was obviously flushed. He was in an uncomfortable spot for a Police Lieutenant in a town that was supposed to be clean. "Guess I ought to get around town a little more," he grunted. "I seem to have been missing a few things that were going on."

A disturbance near the door caught their attention as Aida rose to go back to the bar. A sailor was trying to get outside, and the argument was getting louder.

"Come on, let me out," the sailor was saying. "I got to get back to my ship. I'm supposed to be back aboard by three o'clock, and they'll put me on report if I'm not back there in time."

Flynn glanced at Castro. "I'll go over and see if I can calm him down," he offered. He walked to the door and tapped the nervous

sailor on the shoulder. "What's the trouble, son?"

"Golly, sir, I've got to get back to the ship. I don't want to get involved here. I can't."

"What's the problem? You know we can't let anyone leave until the investigation is finished."

The sailor took him aside. "Look, Commander, please, can't you get me out of here? Listen, sir, I've been to mast twice now for this, and the Captain said I'll get an Undesirable Discharge if he sees me again this hitch."

"Show me your ID and Liberty Cards," said Flynn.

Reluctantly, they were presented. Both had "MINOR" stamped on them, in large letters. "You're under age?" Flynn asked. "What are you doing in here?"

"Golly, Commander, you know how it is," the sailor said. "I got a taste for beer, and I'm almost twenty-one. Sometimes they forget to check ID cards, and when they do, I get to hoist a few."

"Didn't the owner check your card when you came in?"

"No, sir. I came in alone, and sort of ducked around to the far end of the bar as soon as I got inside. I guess he didn't see me come in. I was lucky tonight, because he usually catches me before I can get to the bar." The sailor was silent for a moment, then said ruefully, "Maybe I'd have been luckier if he'd caught me. Then I'd be able to finish this hitch."

"How long have you been here?"

"I don't know, sir. I must have come in about ten minutes before all the shouting started. I hadn't even finished my first beer when all that broke loose."

"All right, sailor, go on back and sit down where they told you to. I'll keep your Liberty Card, and let a couple of SP's take you back to your ship later." The youth's face fell. "I'm not going to cover up for you," Tom added. "If you're going to break both the military and civil codes, knowing you're doing it, you're going to have to face the consequences."

Tom returned to the table. "Just a minor, trying to get out before he got caught," he told Castro. "Managed to slip past Gomez a few minutes before all the fuss started."

"Yeah, sometimes, if a crowd comes in, Gomez will miss one or two. Let's have Hawes over now, and see what he has to say."

Hawes was nervous. He fished a cigarette out of a thin pack, and sat toying with the empty wrapper, crumpling it, twisting it, then smoothing it out on the table.

"You guys think I did it, don't you? I never did it. Sure, he owed me a few bucks, and we were both playing around with Aida, but we were still buddies. I'd never kill him."

Castro looked at him calmly. "We haven't said we think you did it. We want to find out who did it, Hawes, and we think you can help

us. If you did do it, we'll find out, and you can help yourself right now by telling us all about it. You didn't do it in self-defense, did you?"

"I said I didn't do it at all!"

"All right. Did Wells ever pay you the money he owed you?"

"No. I've been reminding him of it pretty regular, but he never got around to paying it. He kept saying he had something else that was too urgent to put off, and as long as we were shipmates, I ought to wait."

"Tell us about tonight, Hawes. Did you see Wells go into the washroom?"

"I never paid any attention to him after we got here. I didn't see him leave the bar. We are all watching the girls up on the stage."

"Did you stay at the bar all the time you were in here?"

Hawes looked down at the table. "Yes, I did," he murmured.

"That wasn't very convincing. We know you left the bar; what did you do when you left?"

"Okay, I left the bar. I just didn't want to get myself in any deeper than I already am. Thought if you hadn't heard, you might leave me alone. Yeah, I left the bar. Was about to run out of cigarettes, and went over to the machine to get some more."

"When was this, Hawes?"

"Well, it was a few minutes before Aida was due to come on. I didn't want to miss any of her act, so I went before she came on."

"Did you go anywhere near the washroom?"

Hawes sat silent for a minute, perspiration breaking out on his forehead. "Hell, if I denied it, you'd probably bring in half a dozen people that held my hand while I was in there. Yeah, I went into the washroom a couple of minutes before I went after the cigarettes. Made such a quick trip I didn't think anyone had missed me."

"Was Wells in there?"

"No, damn it!" Hawes shouted, a vein standing out on his forehead as he half-rose from his seat. "You'll play hell getting anybody to say any different!"

Castro reached over and gripped Hawes' shoulder in a strong hand. "Calm down, Hawes. If you're innocent, you've nothing to worry about. Now, where's the cigarettes you bought?"

Hawes fumbled through his clothing. "I had them right here; didn't pay much attention, thought I had them in my pocket." He patted himself more rapidly, growing anxious. He looked at them white-faced. "I can't find them," he said.

"Did you really expect to find them?" Castro asked, "or were they just the first explanation you thought of for leaving the bar?"

"Honest, Lieutenant, I had them. I bought them at the machine there, behind the manager's stool, and then I set them on the bar for a while. I thought I picked them up and put them in my pocket."

Castro snorted. "Well, it's too bad. A full pack of cigarettes would have helped us believe your story."

"Lieutenant, believe me, if I had known it when I bought them, I'd have sure held on to them a lot better than I did."

Castro leaned over, beckoned to one of his men standing by. "Romero, take this man over to one of the tables, and don't let him out of your sight. I'm holding him on suspicion of murder."

Neither Castro nor Flynn looked satisfied as Hawes was led away. "I don't have a good case yet, Tom, but it shouldn't take long to dig out everything we need. Since we have all the principals here, and it's all fresh in everyone's mind, I think it's best to keep on going, and get the whole case finished tonight."

Tom was doubtful. "I'm not convinced you've got the right man, Pete. He seemed very convincing to me. Still, I don't have anyone to offer you to replace him."

Castro smiled confidently. "Care to bet a dinner on it? Remember, it hurts me just as much as it hurts the man I arrest, if I'm wrong. We've questioned all the witnesses who can tell us anything, and my squad has covered the bystanders. Of course, it's not a strong case yet, but everything points to Hawes. What do you think we've missed?"

Flynn hated himself for the idea, but suggested, "Let's take another look in the washroom, now it's empty. Maybe there'll be something in there for us. I had a feeling there was something I should have noticed when I was there before, but I was too eager to get out for it to register."

The washroom was emptier now. The blood was beginning to harden, turning black, and its sweetish odor was mingled with the other smells Tom had noticed before.

They stared around the filthy room. Something grated under Tom's foot, and he looked down. Bits of glass. Rapidly, he scanned the floor. Behind the toilet bowl was a piece of rubber, the bulb from an eyedropper. Mud, blood, and scraps of paper towels were mingled in soggy confusion on the floor, and feet had trampled the lot into an indefinable mass. There was nothing else to be found in the muck.

"Well," Flynn admitted, "guess there wasn't anything here, after all. Nothing but this mess."

"No, Tom, we found something that could cost me a dinner."

"How do you figure? What can you get out of this mire?"

"We have a broken eyedropper. Could have been dropped anytime in the last year, judging by this filth, but let's work on the assumption that Wells, or someone else in here tonight, dropped it."

"What does that give us?"

"Narcotics!"

Flynn smiled sheepishly. "Guess I'm a little thick about these things. Sure, this may be why Wells felt

sick earlier, and thought he'd feel better later on. It might also be the reason he was putting off paying Hawes. I hear it's an expensive habit."

"Yes, but maybe Wells wasn't using the stuff at all. Maybe he surprised someone else in here using it."

"Those scars on his arms make me think Wells was the one, Pete; that story about the Arabs made a good cover for him." Flynn snapped his fingers, an idea lighting his face. "I think Mason ought to be called back for more questioning. The Hospitalman on a Destroyer is likely to have access to narcotics."

Hawes stared eagerly at them as they returned to their table. They passed him by without a glance, and he shook his head hopelessly. His shoulders slumped and he slouched down in his chair, head hanging.

At the table, Castro signaled for Mason to return to them. "Sit down, Mason," he said. "We have a few more questions for you."

"Sure, Lieutenant, what do you want to know?"

"Mason, we're a little curious about you. You wear these expensive tailor-made uniforms instead of issue, you drive a big Jaguar, and you carry high-priced accessories. Where do you get the money to indulge in these things?"

Mason's brows gathered themselves together in puzzlement. "What are you driving at, Lieutenant? I don't see where the source of my money is involved in Wells' murder, and until it's shown to be different, it's none of your business where I get it."

Castro's eyes flashed at Mason, and he spoke sharply. "This attitude won't get you off any hooks, Mason. It's more likely to pull you on tighter. Get wise, sailor. You're a Hospitalman, and Wells was taking narcotics. Draw your own conclusions as to whether your income concerns us or not." Castro slapped his palm on the table for emphasis.

Mason paled. He sat speechless, turning this information over in his mind. "You don't think I was furnishing dope for Wells, do you?" he finally said, incredulously.

"That's exactly what we think, Mason," Flynn interposed, "and I'm going to recommend an inventory of your narcotics supply on board ship. Could you stand that?"

Mason made no reply, but stared slack-jawed at Tom.

Castro resumed his interrogation. "Right now, since you have so little to say about the narcotics, you'd better think back over your story to us, and see if you gave a complete account of your actions in here. We're going to recheck our stories, and if you've got any period of time unaccounted for, you're going to be in trouble."

Mason finally drew himself together. "Look, Lieutenant, I'm sorry I blew up. It was like a slap in

the face to be accused of selling narcotics, and the suspicion of murder on top of it made it worse. It must look funny for a whitehat like me to be duded up, and driving the car I do, and I don't blame you for jumping to conclusions the way you did. I've got an outside income, and not from selling my medical stores. A few years after I joined the Navy, my Father died, and I have an income from his estate."

"Why should a man with an independent income stay in the Navy?"

Mason thought for a while, then smiled. "You know, Lieutenant, I ask myself the same thing every time I ship over. But my Dad brought me up to feel that people with money should have something worthwhile to keep them busy. I think my job is worthwhile, and interesting as well. I get to serve my country, get around the world a little, and enjoy myself with a bunch of friends whenever I want. What could be better, particularly when I know all I have to do if I get tired of it, is finish out my enlistment?"

"Very high-sounding, Mason. You still haven't told us whether your narcotics store could stand an inventory."

Mason swallowed, grew more serious. "Well, Lieutenant, that's sort of an embarrassing question. As it so happens, I'm short, right at the moment, but not for the reason you think. One of the other cans in the Division shoved off the other day for six months in the Mediterranean, and they were short a few things; stuff that had been used, but not yet replaced. I loaned their Hospitalman some of mine, and he's going to return them as soon as he gets the stuff he has on order."

Flynn barked a question. "You don't have a receipt for these items you say you loaned?"

"Hell, Commander, old Goresby on the other ship went through Boot Camp with me, and we've been together off and on for years. You don't think I'd make him give me a receipt when I've got his word, do you?"

"For that sort of stuff, Mason, I'd get a receipt from my own brother, and probably get it in duplicate from a friend."

Castro interrupted the discussion of Navy ethics to ask another question. "Mason, we've heard tonight that Wells was playing around with this girl, Aida, and we've got a pretty good idea that he was using dope. Both of these things cost a lot of money to indulge. He owed Hawes twenty dollars that we know of, but his pay wasn't enough to keep up with his expenses. Did he ever approach you to borrow any money?"

Mason swallowed before answering, then talked slowly and painfully. "Well, yes, he did, as a matter of fact. He said Aida was costing him plenty, but he didn't think it would take too much to cut Hawes out completely. He borrowed some from me, but we kept it quiet."

"How much did he borrow?"

"Well, it wasn't borrowed all at once. He hit me up once or twice a week. He owes me about four hundred dollars, now."

"Four hundred!" It was Castro's turn to register shock. "How was he going to pay it back?"

"Oh, we had it all figured out, Lieutenant. His enlistment expires in a couple of months, and he had agreed to pay me back out of his reenlistment bonus. He would have had a little left over for himself after he paid me back. That's why I never mentioned his owing me money."

"With him dead, there's not a chance you'll get it back, now."

Mason shook his head. "No, there isn't, is there?" He shrugged. "I suppose I should have known better than to let him get into me for that much."

Castro changed the subject abruptly. "Do you still insist that you never left the bar all evening?"

"Okay, Lieutenant, you'll probably get it out of the others anyhow. We all got together on our stories while we were waiting for you to get here. Hawes was to admit going wherever he went, since he was probably seen going. Gregory and I were going to clear each other, since neither of us was involved." Mason drew a deep breath before proceeding. "I got a pretty good-sized check the other day, and decided to throw a little party tonight, for the others. Actually, we'd all been at the tables up until the stripper who comes on before Aida started her dance. Then, we moved to the bar, like we'd agreed to do before we split up. We missed Wells a little later. No one remembers whether he sat there at all, or just set his glass down next to Gregory and went into the head."

Castro winced. "Haven't I got a straight story out of anybody here?"

Mason shrugged, and looked Castro straight in the eye. "Our stories were straight, except for a little simplification."

"You say you went to the bar and missed Wells. Why didn't you miss him at the table? There, you'd have been facing each other, so should have missed him sooner."

"We weren't paying any attention, Lieutenant. We didn't go to the tables to chat with one another. We split up and paired off with the girls. He must have gone to the bar, though, or his glass wouldn't have been there. Nobody kept track of anyone else. Hell, even the girls had to come and go pretty often, to do their turns on the stage."

"Good grief!" Castro nearly shouted his rage. "Didn't anyone see anybody here tonight?"

"Yeah," Mason mumbled, almost inaudibly, "Wells saw someone."

"Yeah," mimicked Castro, "and I'm seeing you a little more clearly, now. You and Hawes will be keeping each other company tonight, if things don't clear up pretty soon."

With Mason under guard, Flynn and Castro had little to say to one

another. Occupied with their thoughts, both were silent for long minutes. At last, Flynn looked over at the Police Lieutenant. He cleared his throat, then inquired, "Don't you think Mason's story cleared him? He'd hardly kill Wells, and lose his investment, would he?"

"There's still the dope to consider, regardless of the money angle. Let me go over and talk to the others a second."

Castro returned, looking more puzzled than before. "Mason's story may or may not be true; if it is, though, he's a long way from being clear."

"How come?"

"For the past few weeks, Wells has been going around bragging about getting out of the Navy; apparently, he had no intention of reenlisting." He paused, then looked over at the bar. "Guess we'd better start talking to the entertainers."

Tom stopped him from waving the first girl over. "Wait a minute, Lieutenant. Before you do that, let's go over the whole thing, from the beginning."

Castro grunted. "Okay. The way it looks now, no one saw or cared what anyone else did. Either Hawes or Mason could have easily followed Wells in there, and done the job, and both of them had reason to do it. Mason could have done it before they met at the bar —all he would have had to do was get Wells' glass and set it next to Gregory's to set up his alibi. And Hawes has only one flimsy cigarette story for his."

Flynn smiled wryly. "As far as opportunity is concerned, everyone in the place is on the suspect list."

"Yes, but Hawes and Mason still get my vote for the most likely ones, and Mason has a better motive than Hawes. If Wells was getting his fixes from Mason, and had threatened to expose him, we'd have one motive. And owing him all that money, then deciding not to collect his reenlistment bonus gives us a good alternative motive."

"Somehow, neither Mason nor Hawes strike me as murderers."

"They never do, Tom, until it's too late."

The two men sat silent again for a time. They drummed their fingers on the table top, whistled tunelessly, and stared idly around the room while they thought. Flynn was first to interrupt the silence. He coughed speculatively. Castro looked at him in question. Hesitant, Flynn spoke quietly. "Pete, I realize I'm prejudiced, being in the Navy; you know the Shore Patrol's main job is to look out for the interests of the sailors, rather than to act as policemen. That is, unless it's necessary to act like police."

"I don't follow you, Tom."

"This is only speculation, you understand, but suppose it turned out these men from the Shubrick were telling reasonably honest stories, aside from the modifications Mason's story introduces. This busi-

ness of getting together on one story to tell; assume that was just to help get things over with faster, rather than to obstruct justice."

"Are you trying to tell me Wells committed suicide? You're pretty well eliminating all the suspects."

"I don't think so. If you add in the other stories we've heard, plus what we've seen tonight, you'll probably come to the same conclusion I have. I think Wells was about to spill something about his supply of dope; possibly, needing a goodly chunk of money, he was thinking of blackmail. That would fit the impression we've got of his character. All we need is to pin down the source of supply, and I think we've already had an indication of that, without seeing it at the time."

Castro pondered Tom's remarks. "You may have something there," he said after a moment's thought. "A few tangible facts would strengthen it, though."

"Suppose we confront everyone with the situation as we see it. We might get a positive reaction out of it."

"We might not, too. You know, we won't have any control over how any of these people react."

"Can it hurt to try?"

Castro thought about it. Finally, he nodded. "All right. Since it's your idea, you can do the talking. I'll gather everyone at the inner tables, you can have the stage." He grinned and patted Flynn's shoulder. "Don't worry," he said, "the first one that shouts 'take it off' will be booked for creating a disturbance."

Tom strolled around the bar and into the dressing room, while Castrio saw to the details of setting up the performance. The three sailors from the Shubrick were seated at adjacent tables, with Gregory between the two suspects. Aida sat next to Mason. The bystanders, and the other girls from the show were on the other side of the stage. The police opened their ranks long enough to permit Gomez to shift his stool closer to the stage. When all was ready, Tom stalked onstage, by his manner defying anyone to snicker at the idea of a burly Lieutenant Commander appearing on it in uniform. He stopped in the center of the platform, where the single spotlight could shed its weak glow on him. The continually shifting gelatins caused his color to vary, but since they contributed to the mood of the scene, Tom did not call for any change in the lighting.

"I think," he began, "that we're nearly through here. Lieutenant Castro has asked me to express his regret to all of you who were detained during the investigation, and hopes that you'll understand that it was necessary until he had the case broken. Before making his arrest, he thought it wise to tell everyone here exactly what took place, so as to avoid having rumors start that could harm innocent people."

He paused, looking at Castro. The Lieutenant smiled encouragingly, touched his right thumb and forefinger together, and nodded at Tom to continue.

"Now, earlier tonight, four sailors from the Shubrick came in here together. Two came, presumably, to see Aida. The other two say they came just to stick with the other two, and to see the show. Two of these men had gotten cool toward one another lately, when they both started making a play for the same girl. Tension between them was increased by a twenty dollar debt Wells owed Hawes, since Hawes was having a hard time collecting. During the routine just before Aida's, both these men had reason to go to the washroom. Only one of them came out."

He paused to check reactions. Hawes, who had been listening closely for some sign he had been cleared, dropped his face in his hands, his shoulders shaking nervously. Tom resumed his summary.

"We've heard several conflicting stories, here. We think we've figured out which parts of each story to accept. First off, we assumed that Hawes had followed Wells into the washroom. Yet, Hawes says he didn't see Wells in there. If he's guilty, that's exactly what he'd be expected to say, so his statement alone isn't worth much. Still, if he's innocent, and his story is true, then he must have gone in before Wells did, and someone else is the murderer. We can only guess which is the correct version, because no one was paying enough attention to comings and goings to say who went in first."

The spectators looked up intently, but only Castro knew the direction Flynn was heading.

"Hawes claims that after he left the washroom, he left the bar again, to get a pack of cigarettes. If he did, Mr. Gomez might have noticed him, since the cigarette machine is near the door. Did you see Hawes get his cigarettes, Gomez?"

Gomez shifted his weight around on the stool, and surveyed the crowd before replying. "No, Commander, I don't remember seeing anyone buy cigarettes for at least an hour before the trouble started."

"Yes," Flynn agreed, "and Hawes can't even produce a fresh pack to help give credence to his story."

Hawes raised his head, sudden recollection dawning in his eyes. He started to say something, but Flynn motioned him to remain quiet.

"In searching the washroom after removal of the body, we found evidence that Wells used narcotics. He used a switchblade knife to open a vein, and an eyedropper to inject the dope. That was why he went to the washroom, where he was killed. Before he finished his preparations tonight, someone came in and surprised him. This person took Wells' own knife and, for some reason, killed him. Now, why should any-

one want to kill Wells?" He looked at the silent audience. All eyes were on him, waiting for him to continue.

"Was he killed because he was competing for Aida?" She drew herself up and looked haughtily around the room at mention of her name. Flynn's lip curled. "She wouldn't be worth anyone's life," he said, as she spat at him.

"Was it money? Wells owed money to at least two of his shipmates. I doubt that any sailor would kill another over twenty dollars, particularly in cold blood. Granted, if Wells were under the influence of his drug, he might have a warped sense of values, and either the money or the girl could have touched off an argument with Hawes that ended with him on the floor, dead. Or, Mason might have questioned him about the repayment of the four hundred dollars Wells owed him, with the same result. The news that Wells didn't intend to reenlist might have been quite a shock to Mason." Tom glared down at Aida, Hawes, and Mason.

"How about the narcotics? Suppose Wells thought he was paying too much for the stuff he needed? Suppose he saw that the threat of exposure might be a weapon he could use to drive the price down? The penalty for illegal sale of narcotics is heavy. Particularly if they happen to be the property of the government." Flynn looked directly at Mason as he spoke. Mason met his stare momentarily, then shifted uncomfortably and dropped his eyes. The police, at a signal from Castro, moved closer to the group of suspects.

"Mason has admitted a shortage in the narcotics entrusted to his custody. He has no means of accounting for this shortage. If Wells knew of this, and he would suspect it if he had been getting it from Mason, he might be tempted to put his knowledge to use. Mason, raised for better things, might rebel at the thought of a long prison term. Wouldn't you Mason?"

Mason didn't reply. Staring moodily at the bar, he gave no indication that he heard Flynn.

"Mason doesn't quite fit, though, any more than Hawes does. Wells said before he left the ship that he felt sick, but thought he would feel better later on. If this was narcotic hunger, and Mason was supplying him, why did Wells refuse to go to sick bay before he left the ship? Lieutenant Castro and I decided that Mason could probably be eliminated; we think Wells' source for dope must be the same as Aida's."

Aida's gasp broke the tense silence. She shrieked, "Why you lousy crumb! I never told you I was on the stuff!" She leaped from her stool and tried to break out of the circle, but was caught and held by the alert police.

Flynn's face was hard as he looked at her. "You didn't have to tell us. Those marks you were rub-

bing on your arm were enough for that, once we knew dope was a factor in the case. Was it you that got him hooked?"

Aida was beyond any response. Her only interest was to get away from there. Her employer glared at her. "You slut," he stated in a flat tone, "I don't want any scummy hopheads here. You're fired."

Tom was getting to the end of his story. "Even though Aida didn't tell us she was an addict in so many words, we knew it. And she described in her interrogation the man who was the source of supply. A man who knew her intimately enough to be aware she was taking it; a man who manages to support a considerable establishment on twenty or thirty beer-drinkers each night." Gomez looked up sharply. He began to edge off his stool. The ring of police began closing in on him as Tom continued, "A man who doesn't miss any opportunity that might lead to an extra few dollars."

Gomez, gripped fast by two police officers, growled, "You can't prove a thing, Commander. I was sitting by the door all night. I sit there every night."

Flynn nodded. "Yes, this habit of yours almost threw us off. You counted on an alibi by misdirection. Since you're always there, you figured your absence would go unnoticed for a short time in the darkness. But you slipped up. In order to be safe, you couldn't have anyone cover the door for you, and while you were gone, a minor slipped in, something that would never have happened if you had been there. And I think that, a little while ago, Hawes remembered that you weren't on your stool when he bought his cigarettes. Isn't that right, Hawes?" Hawes nodded, a look of relief on his face.

"When the group from the Shubrick returned to the bar from their tables, you saw Hawes enter the washroom. As soon as he came out, Wells entered. He had probably bought a packet from you during the period the four were at the tables. Maybe that's when he threatened blackmail. At any rate, you waited a minute or two, then went in after Wells, and knifed him. On your way back to the stool, you saw Hawes at the cigarette machine. Knowing this might give him a weak alibi, you waited, and in the excitement after discovery of the body, you managed to slip his fresh pack off the bar."

Flynn stepped down from the stage to straddle a chair. "Lieutenant, when you search Gomez, you ought to find Hawes' cigarettes, plus Wells' missing twenty. I think they'll just about sew it up for you."

Tom stretched and stood up. "It's way past my bedtime, Pete. I think I'll go back to the base and get my report cleaned up so I can get off duty. I'll collect that dinner at the Lobster House, a week from tonight."

corpse doctor

by . . . Stewart Sterling

"I AM NOT especially nervous," argued Sergeant Mulcahy, shifting two hundred pounds from one brogan to the other and bracing himself against the roll from the bow-wave of a railroad tug. "But this harbor jog, it is driving me wacky. I been feeling ga-ga for some time now, but when I drink one glass of bock and start seeing dead men, I figure it is time for sick-leave."

Steve Koski, Shield 92741, first-class plainclothes, sat on the motor-box of the *Vigilant* and stoked his pipe. His eyes were the cold blue common to men who spend long hours on watch at sea.

"If it's dead men you want," he said, "try the morgue."

"I do not care about seeing dead men." The big Irishman spoked the wheel and the *Vigilant* angled past the Welfare Island nunbuoy. "But especially, I do not care about talking to them."

The police patrol boat nosed into the full sweep of the flood-tide coming up the East River; and save for the drone of the motor and the oc-

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The men who patrol the harbors of our coastal cities are one of the least known of our law enforcement agencies. Sometimes autonomous—more often a part of their cities' complex crime fighting machinery—these men wage a ceaseless fight to keep the rivers and the harbors they patrol free of the criminal elements menacing our society.

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casional hollow voice of the short-wave set, the chill March evening was quiet and peaceful on the water.

"I know how it is, Joe." Koski pulled up the collar of his tan top-coat. "You start off by gabbing to yourself, then the first thing you know there's someone tossing the ball back to you . . ."

"You figure I am kidding, Steve." Mulcahy reached for an overhead switch, and red and green running lights were reflected from port and starboard waterways. "I am not kidding, I know this cluck is dead—still and all, I am talking to him."

The plainclothesman stretched his six feet two of lanky bone-work, yawned and shook his head sorrowfully.

"Lay off those pickled eels, Joe. And that bockwurst. One day you get spots before your eyes; next day it's ghosts."

"This was a lug that you know," added the skipper of the *Vigilant*.

"Maybe you been mixin' marihuana with your plug-cut. That stuff'll make you see around corners."

"He was Gouger Schmidt."

The tall man leaned against the forward bulkhead and put his arm around Mulcahy's shoulders.

"Listen, sarge, the Gouger is dead. He kicked off in the sick ward of Meiker's Island Prison last November. Pneumonia, it was. He was planted in Potter's Field in a plain pine box. And if he's got out of there, he ought to be in vaudeville instead of wasting his time chinning with cops."

"I know all about that." The sergeant pointed toward the Manhattan shore. The evening lights of towering office buildings and terrace apartment houses were mirrored in the ebony of the river surface. Perhaps a hundred feet off the starboard quarter was a bulky shadow on the water.

"Better get the boat-hook, Steve." The patrol-boat slowed as the clutch was freed. "Might be nothing but an old bunch of clothes, but we better give a look. About the Gouger now. I know very well he is not alive, but I am in this beer and burg joint and in comes the Gouger and sits down at a table and says, 'Scramble two.' You got something there, Steve?"

Koski was leaning far over the stern, laboring at something in the water.

"I'm not doing this to reduce. Gimme a hand."

They dragged aboard something that might once have been a man.

The detective said, "Here is one guy who is corpsed up so he won't talk back to you, Joe. Look at what's left of his face."

The sergeant swallowed hard.

"I do not care much about looking at floaters. This fellow must have run into something."

"Looks like he'd been run through a rock-crusher." Koski knelt over the sodden mass of bloated flesh and bedraggled clothing.

Mulcahy drew a long breath.

"His mother would have a hard time recognizing him, sure."

"I'll say she would. Skull smashed like an eggshell."

The sergeant leaned over the rail and fished something out of the water.

"I got his hat, Steve."

The plainclothesman whistled.

"You got more than that, old timer."

"It looks to me like just an old straw hat, Steve."

"Not many guys wear straw lids in the middle of March unless maybe they are in Miami." The detective turned the hat over, drained the water from it, sniffed at the brim, fingered the soggy sweatband. "Also, it's a funny sort of accident that will crush in the top of a guy's dome and not bust his hat at all. Hook her up, sarge. I want the doc to turn this fellow inside out."

"The doc would have no trouble doing that with me right now," answered Mulcahy. "I am more than half that way already."

The *Vigilant* vibrated under the throb of a hundred and fifty horses. Her bow lifted, the motor settled . . . hhhrummmm . . . hhhrummmm—and the shore lights started to slip behind them rapidly. She rounded the fish piers at the foot of the island and headed for the Harbor Squad basin at the Battery.

On the floor of the cockpit the dead man lay on his back and looked up at a new moon with sightless eyes.

The top detective assigned to the Harbor Squad, New York City, was waiting outside the autopsy room when the assistant medical examiner finished.

"There wasn't any water in his lungs," the doctor announced.

Steve Koski said, "I didn't think he was drowned."

"Been dead about fourteen—fifteen hours. No sign of organic failure; no evidence of poison. Hadn't eaten for eight—ten hours. Fractures of skull in five different places . . ."

"Made with an unidentified blunt instrument. I know that one."

"Well," the doctor grinned,—"he was badly bruised about face and neck."

"So that's what you call bruised. I'd like to see what you mean by a good beating-up, sometime."

"Might have been caused by a fall or being run over. Probably by blows."

"Probably. Anything else?"

"You didn't expect me to find his name and address tattooed on his chest, did you? I'll send you a copy of the report." The doctor began to wash up.

Koski walked to Center Street—walked slowly, hands in pockets, eyes vacant. Inspector Gaintor was waiting for him. The head of the Identification Division was tall, tough and taciturn. He had his feet crossed on a flat-top desk, a hat

pulled low over his eyes and was worrying an unlighted cigar around in his mouth.

"What you steamed up about now, Koski?"

Steve told him about the empty pockets, the labels ripped out of the ready-made clothing, the absence of rings or jewelry, the straw hat. The Inspector was skeptical.

"What about the hat? It's no crime to wear a straw out of season. Maybe it wasn't even his. He wasn't wearing it when you fished him out of the East River, was he?"

"It fitted what was left of his head." The detective was stubborn. "And it fitted his looks."

"I didn't know we had a fashion expert on the Harbor Squad. What the hell kind of looks does a man have to have before he wears a straw hat?"

"He was a big guy, Inspector. Strong and heavy. Lots of muscle. Plenty of callouses on his hands. He was what you'd call beefy . . ."

"I'll have you come with me when I pick out my next derby, Koski."

"—'beefy' . . . like a butcher ought to be."

The Inspector took his feet off the desk.

"A butcher . . . hmmm."

"Who else wears a straw hat in winter in this neck of the woods?"

Gaintor tongued the cigar from the left to the right side of his mouth. "Maybe you got something there."

"Butchers wear straws to keep from catching head colds when they go from a hot store into a cold refrigerator."

"We haven't any nice fresh butchers listed as missing."

"Maybe this lad was supposed to have been at work all day. Maybe he is late getting home, sometimes. Maybe he lives alone and there's no one to send in an alarm that he's missing."

Gaintor grunted, "He'd been dead fourteen or fifteen hours when the autopsy was made?"

"That's right, Inspector."

"Maybe he was going to a masquerade at four or five o'clock in the morning?"

Koski leaned his elbows on the desk. . . . "I got a pretty good idea what he was doing early this morning."

"Don't tell me you want to search-ez *la femme?*"

The detective didn't smile. "More likely he was down at one of those big wholesale meat places on the river just north of Forty-Second Street."

"Who," asked Gaintor, "Would want to keep a date at an abattoir?"

"He might have been fixing to buy some loins of beef or racks of lamb. The way I figure it, he was looking for somebody."

The Inspector put his feet back on the desk. "Somebody was playing hide-and-seek with him, anyway. Any idea who?"

"I haven't got around to that yet.

But if you'll give me a couple of days on this without any other assignment . . ."

The head of the Bureau of Identification looked at him for a while from under the brim of his felt.

"I'd say it's just routine stuff, Koski, but you've always been lucky—so go ahead and burn the soles off your gumshoes."

"Thanks, Inspector."

"Smell a rat somewhere?"

Koski got to the door. "You might say that."

When he got back to Pier A, he asked the radio man for the *Vigilant.*

"She's up at Randall's," said the officer, "getting a couple of rings fitted. You can get Mulcahy on the phone."

"Listen, Sarge," he said to the Irishman when he had made connections, "pick me up at the basin about four a.m. . . ."

There was a bellow like a stuck bull at the other end of the wire.

"I know it's your day off, Joe, but you'll have to fix it so you can trade in with one of the other boys tomorrow. See you at eight bells." He hung up.

It was after eleven before he finished his report and laid down on one of the emergency cots at the pier. He was up and had a plate of ham and eggs under his belt before three.

The rest of the city has pretty well quieted down by three o'clock in the morning, but First Avenue between Fortieth and Forty-fifth is just getting into its stride for the day. Scores of refrigerator trucks and hotel supply trucks were backed up in front of the abattoirs and storage houses lining the river when the marine detective got there.

Men in undershirts and rubber boots slung carcasses about with short ugly meat hooks. White-coated men made selections from long lines of freshly hung lamb and pork. Truck drivers slept at the wheel waiting for load-ups.

Steve Koski worked his way up the line, asking questions, showing his shield where necessary . . . repeating over and over the description of the man whose remains now laid on an ice-packed slab in the morgue. It was after four when he found what he wanted.

In a butcher's supply store across from one of the largest abattoirs he found an elderly, bald-headed salesman who seemed to know everybody in the meat business.

"I can't say for sure, mister," said the salesman, "but from what you tell me, that sounds like Sam Mannix. No, he doesn't run a store. He works up at Glickman's up on a hundred and sixth, or, anyway, he did."

Koski asked, "Did he come down here often?"

"Never saw him down here in the district," answered the salesman, "till about a week ago. I

razzed him about it; told him it was time he was starting to learn the business."

"What did he say?"

"He said he was trying to learn something all right, but he hadn't got the hang of it yet."

"Whatever it was," Koski said, "he's finished his course now. Keep your eyes open . . . and your ears. Don't tell anybody I was asking you about him."

Mulcahy was asleep in the pilot house of the *Vigilant* when Koski got aboard.

With lights out and motor cut, the *Vigilant* lay in the shadow of a pier a little south of the Queensboro Bridge. Overhead the first of the early morining traffic began to pull out of Manhattan toward the sleeping hamlets on Long Island. On the river stubby-nosed tugs took advantage of the last of the ebb to push huge car-floats down toward the Brooklyn terminals. Heavily burdened beam-trawlers with laboring diesels plowed down the river toward the Fulton Street Fish Market. A rusty-hulled freighter, light of cargo, churned clumsily in midchannel bucking the outgoing current.

In the tiny pilot house of the *Vigilant* Sergeant Mulcahy was peevish.

"I think we are wasting our time," he contended. "If you know who this dead man is, I think you ought to be looking around on shore for whoever knocked him off."

"I keep telling you I can't get a verification of identity till Glickman's Butcher Shop opens later this morning," Koski explained. "And there'll be plenty of work to do on shore, too, maybe. Right now I'm interested in the river."

"I don't see why." The sergeant was puzzled. "Anybody could've given him the bump and thrown him in the river."

"Anybody who was around the Forties and First Avenue yesterday morning about this time," agreed Koski.

"I do not think I am dumb," protested Mulcahy, "but I do not see why we are hiding here half a mile away when the murderer you are looking for is on shore."

The detective indicated an oil-soaked railroad tie that had circled slowly and laboriously out of the current into the quiet water between two piers. "There's your answer," he said.

The Irishman was more baffled than before. "I do not get you," he replied.

"That railroad tie now. The back eddy has taken it right out of the ebb, clear inshore. If it had *been* inshore on the ebb tide, it would've stayed inshore. Same thing is true down in the Forties."

The sergeant scowled in concentration. "True for you."

"So one thing is sure. This Mannix may have been killed on shore,

but he was sure dumped into the river from a boat."

"Boat?"

"If he had been heaved in from the shore or from off a pier, he'd merely have circled around in a back eddy and, when he did come up, it would be inshore, not out where we found him."

"By God, that is smart."

"It's simple . . . but the next move isn't so simple. What kind of a boat was he thrown off?"

"Holy Mother," breathed Mulcahy, "with a thousand boats a day passing up and down this water, you want to know which one carries a dead passenger!"

Koski scraped at the bowl of his pipe with a jack-knife.

"What we're looking for is a boat that was in this part of the river about this time in the morning yesterday."

"There'd be tugs and barges and car floats . . . likely there'd be some junkies from out of Gowanus and maybe a cargo vessel or two from Newtown Creek."

.."Anything else you can think of, Sergeant?"

Mulcahy considered. . . . "Save a fisherman or two coming in from Montauk or George's."

"You've missed one," said Koski —"look."

Sliding down the center of the river where the current was strongest, making better than fifteen knots, came a fifty-foot work boat, black-hulled and silent.

The *Vigilant's* skipper smiled broadly and reached for the whistle cord.

Koski clamped down on his wrist. "Not yet," he ordered.

"'Tis one of our own, sure," said Mulcahy. "The prison boat from Rat Island, on the morning run for supplies . . . no more nor less."

"Not run by the Police Department, though, Sarge."

" 'Tis not, for a fact. God knows the Department of Correction buys better motors than we can afford." He turned and looked squarely at Koski. "You're not thinking . . . ?"

"I'm thinking we'll head after her. Give it all you've got!"

The Harbor Squad detective did a one-hand over the rail of the prison boat where she lay against the Forty-fifth Street Pier. He landed lightly as a cat, notwithstanding his hundred and seventy pounds of ballast. Hands in his topcoat pockets, he strolled to the after hatch.

"Anybody down there?"

A voice came out of the trunk cabin. "Who wants to know?"

"Just a visiting fireman," said Koski. "Who's in command here?"

A pleasant, weather-beaten face, surmounted by a shock of unruly gray hair, showed above the hatch level. "I am. Captain Carter. Who might you be?"

"Plainclothes. Harbor Precinct. Glad to meet you, Captain Carter."

"Back at you." The captain emerged from the hatch. "Social or business visit?"

"Both," said Koski. "Looking into the death of a guy we picked out of the drink last night."

"Somebody I know?" The captain was concerned.

"That's what I'm trying to find out," explained Koski. He gave details. "You didn't see anybody answering that description around here yesterday morning?"

"No," said Carter, "I wasn't here yesterday morning."

"You don't come here every day then?"

"Practically. We pick up the meat for the various prisons and hospitals on the islands and drop 'em off in time for the crooks to go to work. But yesterday I was laid up. Chet Adams took the run for me."

"Who's Chet Adams." Koski sat down on the trunk house. "Your second?"

"Well, now, he isn't exactly. He's a good waterman but . . . well, you see, Chet's still under wraps."

"Oh, a trusty."

"Sure," said Carter, "but I hope I'm not making any trouble for him. Chet's helped me out a lot, taking over when I didn't feel like making the early run."

"He on board this morning?"

"No . . . only me and the Buzzer. That's the hunky who totes the beef."

Koski didn't seem very interested. "The Buzzer a trusty, too?"

"Nope. He's a D. of C. employee, and the only living proof that the Civil Service examinations would let in any intelligent chimpanzee." Carter chuckled. "He's okay for what he's for . . . strong back, weak mind."

"Was he on board yesterday?"

"Oh, sure. You can ask him. But if he saw this man you picked up, I doubt if he would remember it."

A quarter of beef came hurtling down from the pier head, crashed not a foot where Koski sat.

They looked up. A leg appeared over the string piece, then an arm, and a hand with a meat hook.

"Heads up, Buzzer," called the captain.

"Jeeze, Cap, did I hit you?"

A squat, broad-shouldered figure dropped to the gunwhale with another quarter of beef stuck on the steel hook. The man had no neck at all; his features were shapeless as putty.

"If you'd hit me with that chunk of beef," said Carter, "I'd've gone for you with a boat hook instead of yelling to you. C'mere."

"I didn't know you was on deck —" began Buzzer, "or I wouldn't of—"

He stopped short at sight of Koski.

"Hello, Buzzer."

"I don't know you." The squat man dropped the quarter of beef, still held the hook.

"Name is Koski. Police Department. Came on board to ask a couple of questions."

"Oke by me." The Buzzer was cautious.

"We picked a floater out of the river last night. Man about thirty-five. Big fella . . . husky . . . wearing a dark suit and a straw hat. Name of Mannix. See anybody like that on the pier here yesterday?"

"Yesterday morning?"

"About this same time."

"Well now," the Buzzer considered. . . . "I couldn't be positive but he may be the one that got in the fight just when we was leaving."

"Who was he fighting with?" Koski didn't pay much attention to Buzzer . . . . occupied himself with a tobacco tin.

"I didn't see the other fella very good," the Buzzer explained. "But this first fella—whatever you called him—was sitting on one of those bollards up there, taking it easy like he was waiting for someone when this other man, he come up behind him and sort of shoved him."

"Stewed, maybe," suggested Carter.

"He might've been plastered at that," Buzzer went on. "Anyway, the first thing I know they're slugging away right at the end of the pier. I didn't see no more because we got going up the river."

"That's probably the answer." Koski seemed satisfied. "This fella was coolin' off a big head, and somebody hands him an argument and they have to rough and tumble it out."

"Probably got knocked off the pier. Maybe bumped his head when he fell over."

"I didn't see no more," said Buzzer, "and of course it might not have been the same man."

"I guess you saw the fella I'm talking about." Koski put away his pipe and tobacco. "Well, that winds it up. Thanks a lot."

He vaulted over the gunwale to the deck of the *Vigilant* alongside. "Be seein' you sometime," he called.

As Mulcahy gave her the gun, the plainclothesman saw Carter go below on the big boat. The Buzzer, at the transom, stood gazing after the *Vigilant*. Koski thought he looked worried.

"I think maybe it is you who is going screw-ball instead of me." The sergeant spun the wheel hard to slide around a Manhattan-bound ferry. "You want we should go to Rat Island so you say, 'go into the North River.' "

"You got it right, Joe."

"You would not care about making the trip by way of Ambrose Channel and Newport?"

"I know it's the long way round, but I want to give Carter time to do all his shuttling between Ward's and Randall's and Meiker's before we get there."

The sergeant braced himself for a roll from the bow-wave of an Anchor Line vessel. . . .

"It will be broad daylight," he said, "and I do not see what difference it will make, anyway."

"Rats don't like daylight. Some of 'em will have crawled back in their holes, time we get there. Want me to spell you for a while?"

Mulcahy sighed gratefully. "If you'd take her as far as Spuyten Duyvil, Steve, it would give me a chance to sneak in forty winks."

Koski took over; slanted the *Vigilant* out toward midstream where there was smoother water.

"Make it eighty winks," he said. "I'll take her through Hell Gate."

The sergeant tossed a life preserver in the cockpit as a pillow . . . before the *Vigilant* reached Grant's Tomb, his snores were rhythmic as the exhaust.

The sun came up behind ramparts of the Medical Center as the patrol slogged up the Hudson. A junkie, fearing inspection of cargo, turned tail and ran for the Jersey shore. But Koski kept the bow of the police boat steadily northward.

There was a five-minute wait for a freight train lumbering over the bridge at Spuyten Duyvil. When the span opened the thirty-five footer went into the Harlem River at top speed . . . past apartment houses, power plants, factories, boat clubs . . . through the heart of New York into the swirling currents around the Mill Rock . . . and Hell Gate.

Koski prodded the Irishman with his foot. "Come out of it, Sarge. We're almost there."

Mulcahy rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and looked overhead at the vaulting span of the Triborough Bridge.

"Where will you be wanting to lay?" He took the wheel from the detective.

"The old construction pier, around on the north side, if there's water enough."

"We only carry three foot six for draft. If you're not needing me, I'll be staying on board and getting some practice with the thirty-eight."

"Some guys get all the fun," complained Koski. "You'll be here shooting at rats, and I'll be ashore wishing I could."

The *Vigilant* came to rest alongside the barnacle-covered spiles of a deserted gravel pier.

"Rat Island," as Meiker's was generally known in official circles, has a population of six million. Two thousand of the six million are humans; the rest are vermin.

Once Rat Island had been merely a marshy flat, only a few feet above the level of Flushing Bay. An economizing city government used it as a place of refuse; dumped ten million tons of metropolitan trash and garbage into gigantic piles on the island until it had become a mountain range of rubbish. Fires had smoldered for years deep in the interior of those immense mounds of dumpage, giving the island at night an infernal glow and a vaporous smudge that smells to high heaven. Long before the Department of Correction erected

rows of red brick buildings on the west end of the island, the rat population became a problem. Inmates from asylums on neighboring Ward's and North Brother Islands had found temporary hiding places in the rubbish heaps, only to be bitten to death by hordes of glittery-eyed rodents. Packs of dogs were brought in. Sulphur smudges added their stench to the decaying volcanoes. Professional Pied Pipers took contracts to eradicate the vermin. But vessels which touched at the island always kept someone on guard to see that no unclean visitors came aboard at night.

Steve Koski stood a good twelve inches taller than Chet Adams. That wasn't the only marked contrast. Koski's face was weather-bitten, but smooth-skinned; Adam's might have been a wax model that had had the coloring left out. Two deep lines creased his face on each side of his thin, sharp nose. But he smiled agreeably at the detective's inquiry.

"I didn't see much of the fight," Adams said in a dull, flat voice. "That sort of thing happens every day along the waterfront. I'm supposed to keep on schedule when I'm running the boat."

"But as far as you know," queried Koski, "what the Buzzer told me was correct?"

"As far as I know," agreed Adams.

"You hadn't ever seen this Mannix fellow before?"

"I don't know about that, copper. I see a lot of guys."

"You don't remember him, though?"

"Any reason I should?"

Koski got his face close to the trusty's; said grimly, "I'm doing the asking."

"No." Adams squinted a little, as if his eyes hurt him. "I wouldn't know him from a hole in the ground."

"That's where he wound up, anyway." Koski dismissed the matter. "How long a stretch you doing, Adams?"

"Six to eight."

"Harrison Narcotic violation, wasn't it?"

Adams said, "It was a lousy frame-up," as if he didn't expect the plainclothesman to believe it.

"You off the skis now?"

The pupils of Adams' eyes were as large as grapes, but his voice was still toneless. "There hasn't been any snow on this island for so long it ought to be rated a winter resort."

"I guess it must be pretty tough," said Koski, "to stop using the stuff all of a sudden." He studied something in the bowl of his pipe. "Must get on your nerves."

There was a moment of silence . . . then Adams spoke, this time without moving his lips noticeably. "Don't be riding me, flattie. I took my rap and I'm clean as a whistle."

"That's the way to be. . . ."

"—And I got friends on this is-

land. . . . I ain't a trusty for nothing."

The tall man reached out suddenly, gripped the prisoner's left wrist, clamped a hand at his elbow and pulled up his sleeve. With his thumbnail, Koski jabbed at tiny discolorations on the inner surface of the trusty's wrist.

"Still hurt you, don't they? Those hypo sores can be pretty painful."

Adams spat out an ugly sibilant, wrestled away. His nostrils were distended like a runner's at the finish of a distance race. There weren't any whites to his eyes.

"You nose in on my business, dick, and I promise you a smack in the puss with a shovel."

Koski smiled a little. "That's more like it, cokey. Now you're running true to form."

"Ah, why don't you scram to hell and gone out of here? You got no right to ask me questions, anyhow, and I'm telling you, you'll find a shiv in your back if you don't lay off me."

He backed out of the Deputy Warden's office the way a frightened cat backs away from a dog.

Koski laughed; sat down at the deputy's desk and worked the phone for a while. He called Glickman's Butcher Shop and verified Mannix's identity. He called Pier A and found they'd been trying to get in touch with Mulcahy for an hour.

The first of the work gangs was leaving the cell blocks as he walked back to the construction pier. He heard the spat of the thirty-eight while he was a hundred feet away and hollered:

"Watch it, Sarge. If one of those marbles does a richochet, I'll be coming on board feet first."

Mulcahy was despondent.

"I'm asking for a sick-leave," he said. "I am getting so I miss one rat out of every two. If the Commissioner was to hear about this. . . ."

"You'll hear from the Commissioner quick enough if you don't keep that short-wave set open. I was just checking in with the Battery. They want you over to Randall's —but sudden."

"It is a dog's life," muttered the skipper. "I am off my feed, I get very little sleep, and I am shuttled from pillow to post at anybody's beck and call. What did you find out?"

Koski sat on the string piece, took out his service special and sighted carefully.

"Talked with Adams" . . . *Ping!* "Told me the same set of lies Buzzer told me." *Ping!* "How do I know they're lies?" *Ping!* "Because there *wasn't* any fight on that pier yesterday morning. Mannix hadn't done any mauling. He hadn't even clenched his fists." *Ping!* "Also, he didn't fall off the end of the pier." *Ping!* "And Adams is a cocaine addict, and he's still hitting the stuff, which means

that he's got a better source of income than the city pays him." *Ping!* "Four out of six, Irish, and I think I winged the first one that got away."

Mulcahy kicked life into the motor.

"I do not see what difference it makes," he inquired, "if these two beezarks are lying or not. You do not think they knocked off this Mannix just for excitement?"

Koski reloaded his revolver.

"If they were looking for excitement—" He stood up, brushed off his trousers, put the pistol back in its holster. "—I'll try to accommodate them. Pick me up in time to get downtown for supper, will you? You can dock at the ferry slip; everybody knows by now we're on the prowl here, anyhow."

He watched the *Vigilant* as she slid out of sight behind the wall of the prison.

Back at the Administration Building he asked some questions, had the Deputy Warden write a pass, went looking for the hospital.

He found the Chief Medical Officer's room at the end of a long corridor smelling of ether and iodoform. The man at the roll-topped desk inside the office was a dapper individual with a trim mustache and Vandyke beard. His clothing never came from a ready-made store, and his taste in haberdashery was unobtrusive.

"Dr. Hanlein?"

"That is correct."

"I'm from the Police Department. Harbor Precinct. Investigating the death of a man by the name of Sam Mannix. Picked up in the East River last evening."

"Mannix . . . Mannix. . . ." The doctor considered. Don't seem to recall . . . one of our . . . hmmmm . . . guests here on the island?"

"No." Koski didn't wait any longer for an invitation; dragged up a chair, sat down. "This fellow was a butcher. Worked on the upper East side."

"I'm afraid I don't understand . . . ?" Dr. Hanlein tilted back in his chair, removed his pince-nez, tapped his lips with the glasses.

"There's a possibility," continued the detective, "that one of the trusties here may have known something about the matter. Just a chance. Prisoner by the name of Chet Adams."

"Ah, yes. . . ." The doctor nodded. "One of our . . . ummm . . . narcotic unfortunates."

"That's what I wanted to see you about, Doctor."

"About Adams? Is there something wrong with him?"

"I thought maybe you could tell me that." Koski waited expectantly.

"I'll get his physical record, if you wish." The doctor seemed anxious to be helpful. "But I don't think he's been under our treatment for some months."

"He's been using drugs recently."

The doctor frowned delicately.

"There's no use denying that some of the men manage to obtain contraband," he admitted. "It's regrettable, but with many visitors to the island and the usual proportion of venal officials—"

"—Oh sure, I know. But this Adams is a trusty, runs the Department of Correction boat sometimes when the regular captain is laid up. Now, if he's getting drugs ashore—" The detective spread his palms.

"That's conceivable, but there's always someone else on the boat . . . ah . . . isn't there?"

Koski picked up a gaudily printed leaflet lying on a pile of *Morning Telegraphs,* thumbed it over absent-mindedly.

"There's supposed to be, Doc, only in this case the somebody's a dumb bunny they call the Buzzer; Adams could load the Empire State Building on board without his helper knowing it. Well, I just thought I'd warn you."

"I'll have his cell searched immediately."

Dr. Hanlein took great pains not to notice the leaflet in the detective's hands.

Koski stood up.

"See you have the same weakness I have, Doc—trying to dope out the doggies."

The physician smiled in deprecation.

"I take a flier once in a while. You can't be much of a gambler on a city salary, you know." He extended his hand cordially.

"I shouldn't think so," said Koski. He shook hands. "I've known many a lad to spend more on these tip sheets than he could win putting a big stake on the Derby."

"Hope to see you again sometime, Mr. . . . er . . . ?"

"Koski. Steve Koski. Same to you. Just to prove it, I'll give you a little tip."

The doctor arched polite eyebrows.

"Never put all your potatoes on a long shot. Even if you know your horse, you can't be sure the jock won't cross you up."

The doctor's smile was mere lip-service.

Koski closed the door behind him.

The guard at the hospital entrance to whom Koski had shown his card for admittance was not on post when the plainclothesman left the medical officer's room. Koski turned into the little waiting room to see if the guard was there. He heard the door to Hanlein's office slam and, standing at one side of the waiting room door, observed the dapper man rush out in agitation. Koski watched him run down the hospital steps, hasten around the side of the building.

Save for some prisoners engaged in sodding down a lawn plot across the area, there was no one in sight.

The detective sauntered casually

around the side of the hospital building. There was only one door in the basement. It was ajar.

Koski transferred his service special from holster to coat pocket, went in out of the sunshine to utter darkness. He stood with his back to the door for a long minute, listening. Somewhere in the basement was the sound of hammering. He had his regulation flashlight; decided against using it.

Feeling his way along the wall, he came to a metal door. It was locked. Another slow minute of inching forward in the blackness; then the sounds of hammering were plainer. Another door—he put his ear to it. The hammering was inside. With caution he turned the knob, leaned his shoulder against the door. It swung inward, silently.

He could see into a room perhaps twenty feet square, illuminated by a single bulb. He shivered; the place was as cold as a refrigerator. The walls were painted a bilious green, the concrete floor was rough. There was nothing in the room except a metal table and a half-dozen plain pine boxes, perhaps seven feet long, piled against the rear wall. On the table, directly beneath the glaring light, lay one of the boxes. The doctor was nailing down the lid. He was so absorbed that Koski got into the room without being noticed. At the click of the latch, he looked up—his brown eyes startled.

"Little carpenter work, Doc?" The detective made no attempt to hide the bulge in his pocket as he walked over to the table.

The doctor fingered his pointed beard with his left hand, gripped the hammer in his right.

"What's in the box?" Koski didn't look at the box; he looked at the doctor.

"I don't conceive that it is any business of yours." The doctor's eyes were gleaming with anger. "—But I have no objections to answering. That box is a coffin, and what is in it is what is generally in a coffin."

"Get busy," said Koski. "Open it up!"

Hanlein worked like a man in a trance, but he pried and pounded the boards off the top of the box. There wasn't any inside casket, and the man inside wasn't dressed in accepted funeral fashion. He was a middle-aged man with hollows in his cheekbones and long, thin hands.

"Now that you've seen," murmured the physician.

Koski put his hand on the man's face; the skin was warm. He took out his watch, held it to the lips of the figure in the casket. There was no sign of moisture. The detective felt for a pulse in the throat. There was none.

"He's gone." The plainclothesman was astonished.

"Did you expect to find a live man?" mocked the other.

"I was a little late," admitted Koski. "This fellow was alive ten minutes ago."

The physician laughed unpleasantly.

"—But he's dead now—which means you killed him." Koski went on. "After our talk upstairs, you figured I was about set to turn the steam on, so you got yellow and came down and put the finish on this poor sucker."

Hanlein shrugged his shoulders in protestation:

"Would you be good enough to tell me why I should murder one of my own patients?"

"For dough." Koski was scowling now; his voice taut with scorn. "I don't know how much dough, and I don't know how you worked it, but I've got the general set-up, Doctor Butcher Hanlein!"

Hanlein struggled with a lid; made no answer.

"Trying to make me believe you could subscribe to one of those five-bucks-a-day tip sheets on your salary." The detective snorted. "And if Mannix hadn't suspected something was rotten in Denmark, you'd still be getting away with it."

The physician's glasses were blurred with moisture. He made no attempt to dry them.

"Won't talk, eh?" Koski smiled sourly. "Ever since my side-kick told me that Gouger Schmidt had done a Houdini out of here, I been wondering how it worked. I'd say a prisoner would pass over some dough; then he'd fake being sick and one night you'd list him as dead. That the way it went?"

Perspiration dripped from the point of the doctor's beard. He gave no sign he heard.

"From the looks of this poor punk here, you gave him an injection of some sort to make him look like a croaker, in case anybody was watching. Then I suppose you boxed the live-dead man up, just as if he were to be planted at Potter's Field." Koski waited for a reply. "Well, next morning, Adams would load the casket on the prison boat and unbox him in time to set him ashore in Manhattan. Maybe that's what Mannix saw—one of the punks beating it off the prison boat."

The light went out.

Koski whirled toward the door, tripped on a loose board, fell to his knees, got his flashlight out.

The beam slashed through the blackness; pinned a frightened face to the wall in a circle of white light —the distorted features of the addict.

"Face the wall, Adams," Koski snapped. "Fold your arms . . . put 'em above—"

His head exploded in a roaring burst of flame. He slumped forward on his face.

The first thing Koski heard was the doctor's laugh. He opened his eyes, felt as if someone was pressing his thumbs on the eyeballs,

closed them quickly. He was lying flat on his back on the table where the dead man had been. Directly overhead was the unshaded and glaring light. He lay perfectly still and listened.

"Never take chances with a flattie," Adams was saying. "If they got anything on you, cancel 'em—quick."

"And have the whole Police Department over here looking for him? No, thank you, Chet."

Koski opened his eyes a fraction. "So what do we do?"

Hanlein said, "Roll him over on his face . . . pull up his shirt . . . I'm going to give him an injection.

Koski didn't have full command of his faculties. His head felt as if it weighed a ton; he was still trying to summon his energy to make a fight of it when he felt the pressure of the physician's fingers that meant the hypodermic was coming. At the first prick of the needle, he gave a convulsive jerk, heaved off the table, crashed to the cement floor and laid limp.

"You got to hand it to some of these flatties. Always in there trying. Did he get the dose, Doc?"

Hanlein swore at a broken needle. "Most of it; enough to keep him quiet until we get rid of him."

Adams kicked the prostrate figure in the head.

Koski was too near out to moan. He'd recieved half of the contents of the hypodermic barrel, and already he felt numb. Sounds came to him as from a great distance. The doctor's voice was as if heard down a long tunnel.

"Get a wheel chair, Chet; a hospital nightshirt and a blanket. I'll bandage up his face so nobody will recognize him. After the dinner bell sounds, we'll roll him out to the dump to meet some friends of his. They'll eat his face away in two hours."

Before Adams got to the door, Koski had floated away on a cushion of unconsciousness.

. . . He was dreaming about a gigantic machine which needed oiling; he was stumbling clumsily in and out of dogs, wheels, belts, get ting his fingers and his feet pinched; all the time the machine was squeaking for want of oil. It was some minutes before Koski realized that he was conscious.

He could still hear the squeaking quite plainly. It was sheer will-power that got his eyes open. He was lying on a mound of garbage and ashes. By rolling his head with tremendous effort, he could catch momentary glimpses of scurrying gray figures, which vanished into holes in the garbage heap. There was an unspeakable odor.

For long minutes he lay there summoning strength. His mind was clear now, but his limbs were out of control. He had to get out of there in a hurry . . . that was certain.

Finally, he tried rolling; he discovered he could get sufficient coordination to keep him rolling over and over. He took a lot of punishment; his face was cut and bleeding. He couldn't see clearly where he was rolling, but he forced himself to the last ounce of energy.

The sun was sinking close to the horizon when he made a supreme effort, and half rolled, half dragged himself over a three-foot embankment into icy salt water.

It nearly drowned him, but somehow he found strength enough to get to his knees, lift his head above the surface. He knelt there a long time, breathing great gulps of cool air. . . .

The first lights had just been turned on in the World's Fair grounds across the bay, and Chet Adams and the Buzzer were scrubbing the deck of the prison boat when the doctor came sprinting down the pier path. He wore top coat and carried his operating bag.

"You going in town tonight?" Adams was surprised.

Hanlein got aboard. "We're *all* going in town."

The Buzzer put down his mop and came forward. "What's the matter, Boss?"

"I wish I knew." Hanlein was curt. "When I went back to give that policeman the second injection, he was gone."

Adams began to squint. "You said a man couldn't even manage to move with a shot of that stuff in him, Doc."

"I never saw a man who could," answered Hanlein.

"Maybe his side-kick . . . ?" suggested the Buzzer.

"Let's get out of here." Hanlein was nervous. "We can talk on the way. I don't know how you boys feel about this, but I feel like taking a little vacation."

Adams had the motor going; the Buzzer was coiling up the stern line when they saw the police boat coming up astern. Mulcahy was at the wheel. On the rail sat a figure holding a sub-machine gun.

The doctor dropped flat on the floor of the pilot house. Adams yanked out an automatic and took a snap shot at Koski.

The Thompson said "Tut-tut-tut." Adams fell as if he had been hit with a sledge-hammer.

The *Vigilant* pulled up ten feet from the prison boat.

"Stand up so I can see you," called Koski. "You, Hanlein."

The doctor got unsteadily to his feet.

"Tell that Frankenstein of yours to show fast, or I'll fill him too full of lead to swim."

Hanlein tried to speak; couldn't. The boats drifted closer together. Koski stepped from one rail to the other, the machine gun ready. He got one foot on the cockpit floor when a steel hook came around the corner of the cabin trunk, slashed into the calf of his leg.

Mulcahy yelled, "Look out!"—came out of the *Vigilant's* pilot house and poked a revolver at the doctor.

"Do not try any stuff," he said. "I mean you will get it."

Koski and the Buzzer were rolling over and over on the cockpit floor. Koski was underneath, but had his hands on the squat man's throat, dug his thumbs into the windpipe. The Buzzer made harsh, gasping sounds, and flailed at the detective's head and face with the steel hook. It was over in a minute.

The detective heaved the unconscious form from him, and stood up shakily.

"Holy Mother!" said Mulcahy. "Your face—it looks like it is a hunk of raw meat. You had better let the doc here fix it up when we get on shore."

Koski fingered a deep gouge made by the point of the hook.

"Thanks, Sarge," he said, "but I wouldn't care much about having the doc look after me . . . though from the way my face feels, it'll still be raw meat when these guys are frying."

CRIME IN ENGLAND

A recently published British study stresses a trend recognized as serious both in Europe and on the Continent and in this country—the rise in crimes committed by the allegedly young. Any number of writers, in this as well as in other magazines, will seek explanations for this alarming rise in the urge towards violence among those held too young to vote—or even to drink—but there is no denying that in the rush to talk at great length of, say robbery, as "a crime of late adolescence and early manhood", this is only half the story. Convictions of young men between 17 and 21 years old, in England, were up by 12 percent last year, and of girls by 20 percent, and there was an increase among the still younger age groups. Robberies—usually sudden and unplanned and committed in the open—accounted for many of these convictions.

But, as the Director of the Cambridge Institute of Criminology has pointed out, robberies from persons in charge of money or goods accounts for more than half of the robberies in London today. The perpetrators "are largely robbers who have reached the top of their profession and who also enjoy the highest impunity." And since only one in four is likely to be caught, there isn't too much known about their ages. The same is true for safe-crackers.

This drop in the detection rate is worrying the authorities. For all crimes, throughout the country, it has dropped from 50 percent in 1938 to 44 percent in 1960. And in the London area the percentage of crimes cleared up has dropped to 25, and for robberies it has dropped from 54 to 32 percent.

Why? A decline in police strength, and an increase in the efficiency of criminals, giving rise to one editorial reaction that "the professional may well be overtaking the police in the methods" used. The need for strengthening the police and improving existing training facilities is obvious; in the meantime a legend appears to have had its first serious challenge since the days of the Bow Street Runners. H.S.S.

loophole

by . . . Norman Daniels

One man had refused to leave the death house. He would kill if he was not freed.

He was a tall man, so she had to stand on her tiptoes in order to straighten his white tie. Being that close, she kissed him on the chin.

"You're beautiful," she said.

He grinned at her. "No . . . no, hardly that, Lois. You're the beautiful one in this family and it doesn't make much difference about me because I'm the Governor of the State and at the Governor's Ball I get to dance with all the pretty girls because I am the Governor."

"Well, don't let it go to your head, Sam." He was probably the least vain man she had ever known, so their conversation was merely more of that continuing banter with which they tried to spice their lives.

She was very attractive in a pale green evening gown, though she was the sort of woman on whom almost any lively color looked well. This he knew, even when he married her thirty years ago. She busied herself at the mirror while he bent his spare figure and flicked a little dust off highly polished shoes.

"They should hold this annual ball before the legislature convenes, not the night it's over," she said. "Everybody's so tired, Sam."

Norman Daniels, long prominent in this field, returns to these pages with this story of a man—a brilliant man—who attempts to change history in the state. . . .

"I'll offer the suggestion," he said. "This has been an especially exhausting session—and I'm sure you know why."

She turned off the two vanity lamps, gave one last glance at her gown in the full length mirror and then took his proffered arm.

"Yes, Sam," she said. "I know."

"Thank you for not questioning my motives, Lois."

"I'm sure it requires far more brains than I possess to determine whether or not men live or die."

"It's on a trial basis," he said. "For two years, no one is going to be executed in this state. I signed the bill two hours ago."

She stopped him at the top of the sweeping staircase leading to the reception hall in the Governor's mansion.

"Sam—the pros and cons of capital punishment are hardly for me to comment upon, but I am glad it came in time to save Paul."

"Yes," the Governor said, "I'm glad too. I'm certain his predicament didn't influence me. At least, I hope it didn't, but I hated to see him die. Not that he didn't deserve it and not that his trial wasn't fair, but it would have been agonizing to sit in judgment on his plea for commutation."

"Poor Paul." Lois shook her head sadly. "He had so much hope and so much talent and all of it gone to waste. Did you order the car, darling?"

"It will be waiting," the Governor said. "We'll have a good time tonight. A better one because Paul will be taken out of the death house."

The white-haired factotum of the official mansion opened the door for them and beamed, and said the Governor's wife looked radiant.

"No wonder you keep your job, even when politics and governors change," Sam Talbot said. "We'll be late, John. Don't wait up."

He said, "Thank you, I won't, Governor," but he'd be there.

They climbed into the back of the limousine for the twenty minute ride to the armory where the ball was held. He untwined the tailcoat from his legs as he sat down.

"I hate these full dress affairs," he said, "and I hate tail coats. A tuxedo should be enough."

"Now stop your grumbling," Lois said lightly. "Tails make you look very distinguished."

The limousine slid away from the curb, its State Police driver grinning slightly at the banter from the rear seat. There was a sharp buzz. The driver reached for the radiophone. He handed it back over his shoulder.

"An emergency, Governor," he said. "Warden Avery at the prison."

"Now what in blazes. . . .?" Sam Talbot took the phone. "Hello, Jim. What's wrong?"

He listened and Lois saw his face grow bleak and angry at first and then worried. He murmured

that he understood, returned the phone to the driver and leaned back dejectedly.

"You'll have to lead the Grand March with the Lieutenant Governor, Lois," he said. "I've got to get over to the prison at once."

"Trouble, Sam?"

"Yes. One man has refused to leave the death house. When they came to take him out, he put up a battle and managed to get possession of a gun. He's locked in his old cell with a Deputy Warden as hostage."

"Hostage?" Lois asked. "But his life was spared by the law."

"The prisoner is rather an expert at this sort of thing," the Governor said. "He says if he isn't set free soon, he will murder the Deputy Warden and, under the law, there is nothing can be done to him. He can't be put to death because there no longer is any capital punishment in this state."

"It's Paul Landers," she said quickly. "No one else would think exactly like that."

"Yes, it's Paul. I've got to talk to him and try and make him see reason."

"Isn't that dangerous, Sam?"

"It might be. Who can be sure, but I know Paul rather well and I doubt he'll kill me."

"But he will kill the Deputy Warden," she said. "You can be certain of that. I know Paul too."

The Governor spoke quietly to the driver. A red flasher light was turned on and a siren began to howl. They reached the armory in half the usual time. The Governor stepped out and helped Lois to the sidewalk. It was obvious that the news from the prison had leaked out. The reporters were not there in full force, but enough to create mild confusion.

He asked them to wait a moment and they stepped aside, because he was the Governor and because he always handled them fairly.

"I'll be back as soon as I can, my dear. Have a good time."

"The Lieutenant Governor's wife isn't going to like it when I take him for the Grand March," she said. She stood on tiptoe again and kissed him lightly and then joined a small group waiting to be escorted inside.

"Governor," one reporter asked, "Have you a statement about the crisis at the prison,"

"I only heard it over the radio phone a few moments ago," the Governor said. "Bear with me, boys. As soon as I know all the facts, I'll give you a statement. Meantime, I suggest those of you assigned to the ball remain here, and the others get over to the prison. That's where this situation is going to be ironed out."

The State Trooper held the limousine door open, but the Governor didn't get in. He was watching another car slide to the curb.

"Bill," he said to the Trooper, "is that Senator Jason's car?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll be right back," he said, "for a wide open trip to the prison."

The Governor smiled as he helped the Senate Leader's wife out of their car. "Well, my goodness," she said, "I'm not used to all this service, Governor Talbot."

"You're going to pay for it," he said. "I want to talk to Mark a moment. Do you mind?"

If she did, she had no opportunity to express the fact because the Governor piled into the back seat of the car and shook hands with grey-haired Mark Jason. He talked earnestly for about four or five minutes.

"I'll need between two and three hours," the Senate Leader said. "Good luck, Governor."

Forty minutes later the official limousine rolled through the prison gates. The Warden was there to meet the Governor and they went straight to his office.

"It's a very tight situation," the Warden said. "At first, I thought Paul Landers had gone stark mad, but I can see now that he's only being diabolically clever."

"He usually is," the Governor said. "He went to law school with me so I know him quite well. Now, in all fairness to your expert handling of such a matter, what plans do you have?"

"There's only one thing we can do, Governor. Go in with guns and gas and take him. Dead or alive! The abolition of the death penalty doesn't mean we can't shoot him if he threatens our lives."

"It most certainly does not, Warden, but remember that Deputy?"

"What's your opinion, sir? About the Deputy's chances."

"I'd say they were nil."

"Yes, that confirms my own ideas. Yet—we can't let Landers go."

"Has he issued an ultimatum?"

"Oh, yes. We have about one more hour. He wants all gates and doors open for him, a car waiting outside and if any man so much as shows himself, the Deputy will be killed."

"There's another thing you should know, Warden. If you grant him free exit from the prison, his ego is going to be blown up all out of proportion. Once outside, where he thinks he has a chance, he'll murder the Deputy anyway."

"That settles it then. We'll go in."

"No—not quite yet," the Governor said. "I'll go in—alone."

The Warden shook his head emphatically. "I'm sorry, sir, I can't permit that."

"Why not?"

"Landers would then have two hostages."

"I'm going in if I have to fire you and appoint a new Warden who will have the death house doors unlocked for me. I'm issuing an order, Warden. Have someone show me to Landers' cell."

"I'll take you there myself."

The Warden led the way into the depths of the prison to where the doomed men were kept in a special building set apart from the rest of the institution. It looked like a rather long, red brick barracks building ending in a round room, like the bulb at the end of a thermometer. From this building a slim smokestack rose into the sky. The cyanogen gas was piped as high as possible before being released to the atmosphere.

The door to the closer end of the building led into an ante-room, then there was a gate lock, the outer door of which was open, the inner door locked. Down the corridor of fourteen cells, all were wide open except one.

"Let me in," the Governor said. "Then clear out of here."

"Yes, sir." The Warden unlocked the gate.

"Paul," the Governor called out. "Paul—it's Sam Talbot."

The voice was firm and confident and slightly mocking. "Well, Sam, I suppose I should have expected you, though honestly, I never gave it a thought. Come on, Sam. Come down and see me."

The steel door slammed shut behind the Governor and he heard the Warden's rapid retreat. Another door closed and the Governor was alone with a murderer and his hostage.

The Governor walked down to the closed cell. Paul Landers was waiting for him. Paul was the Governor's age, a devil-may-care smile on his handsome face. Paul's victims always admitted that while they may have been fleeced by this man, or assaulted by him, at least he was distinguished looking and exceptionally handsome. Even the year and a half in the death house hadn't changed that.

Paul stuck his hand through the bars. "Sam . . . you old coot . . . the Governor. Imagine that! The idol of the state, the biggest vote getter we ever had. Will you shake hands with me, Sam?"

"Certainly I will, if you put that silly gun away, Paul. And if I'm assured the Deputy Warden hasn't been hurt."

Paul stuck the revolver behind his belt, indicated the middle-aged man seated on the bunk. "Ask him, Sam."

The Deputy looked up. "I'm all right, sir. We've been playing checkers."

Sam extended his hand. "Fine. Well, Paul, I honestly don't know what to say about this."

"Don't say anything, Sam. Just tell them to let me out of here."

"It's not as easy as that. Besides, they all know you and I used to be friends. I have to move carefully too."

"Let's say—one hour, Sam. I'm not impatient, because I know I'm going to get out—for free."

Sam shook his head. "When I signed the bill abolishing capital punishment in this state, one of my

most gratifying thoughts was that you wouldn't be executed. I can't say I approve of the way you show your appreciation."

"Oh, I do thank you, Governor. Very, very much, but you threw a joker in that bill. Anybody commuted from the death penalty can never be paroled. I don't like prison food, nor prison life, Sam, so I want out."

"Well, obviously," Sam said, "something is going to have to be done."

Paul smiled and nodded contentedly. He'd scanned the Governor's dress suit. "Don't tell me you put on all that flash just to come see your old friend?"

"I was on my way to the Governor's Ball. We hold it every year immediately after the Legislature adjourns."

"Ah—yes. Sam, I'm sorry I had to drag you away."

"Are you really? Then I'll just hurry back in time for some of the festivities and return in the morning . . ."

Paul threw back his head and laughed. "You always knew how to make me feel good, Sam. I'll bet Lois could annihilate me for taking you away. How is she?"

"Fine—and as lovely as ever. I suppose I'd better do something formal, like asking you give me that gun and stop being an idiot."

"That's right. So you asked. What else is new, Sam?"

The Governor smiled. "I wish that streak of larceny had been cut out of you when we were young squirts just going into practice. You'd have made a fine trial lawyer, Paul. But—you became greedy, and greed leads to open avarice and that to crime and that to . . . here."

"Sam, if you get me out, nobody will be hurt. I have some cash put safely away. I can get to it easily and I'll head for any country where there's no extradition. I'll be out of your hair forever—and save the state a lot of money. It's expensive keeping a prisoner for the rest of his life."

"Letting you go will set a very bad example, though."

"I suppose it will. Yet—I doubt anybody in all history will ever get away with a thing like this again. Sammy boy, you used to be the expert on loopholes. You left one a mile wide in this new law."

"I'm aware of it now. What's done can't be undone, Paul. Reminds me of our days of youth. We had some fun."

"If you classify ordering two cups of coffee and a single serving of donuts so we could share them, as fun."

"Your memory's not good. There was one better than that. We walked into a restaurant with a loaf of stale bread we got at a bargain, spent our last nickel for coffee and then made a stew of the bread and all the catsup we could smuggle to the table."

"I shouldn't have forgotten that." Paul leaned against the bars. "It was the moment when I made up my mind getting money was more important than ethics or honesty."

"All I recall is that the mixture tasted very good, and you ate your share. After that—well, you practiced law with methods as close to breaking it as possible. Then you went too far and you were disbarred. That led to selling your advice to criminals, and then into crime itself. I followed your career, Paul."

"I followed yours by reading the newspaper," Paul said, with a touch of rancor. "But I'm not regretting a thing."

"Oh, come off that attitude," the Governor said. "You murdered a man. You're no wanton murderer. Certainly you regret that."

Paul grinned broadly. "Am I being brainwashed, Governor?"

Sam shrugged. "You're very astute. You've changed too. You're cold-blooded now."

"Happens to a man. Look here, Sam, if you're stalling, there's no point to it. I'm going to shoot this Deputy if I don't get out."

"Yes, I suppose you will. Tell me, Paul before we being dickering, what was it like in here before you knew the law was passed?"

"Ghastly!" Paul shuddered. "Day after day . . . sitting here with nothing to do. I saw them take out eleven guys. Down the hall—the oak door—that's where it is. That's where I was headed."

"I'd have been scared stiff," the Governor said.

"The man who says he isn't, is the world's biggest liar. Now let's get this thing on the road, Sam."

The Governor began removing his dress coat. The gun appeared in Paul's hand instantly.

"Hot in here," the Governor said. "I'm only going to remove my coat." He stripped it off, looked for a place to hang it and found none. He walked into the cell opposite and placed the coat on the bunk. Then he returned to the locked door.

"I'm sorry if I startled you, Paul. Tell me, would you have used that gun on me?"

"If I thought you were playing tricks, Sam. I'd have hated to, but I'm a desperate man. I'll never get this chance again and I'm not going to muff it."

"What guarantee do I have you won't shoot me if I do get you out? Or the Deputy Warden as well?"

"You have my word. It's no good, but you can have it for what it's worth. Outside of being jealous of your success, I've nothing against you. In fact, I like you very much. I don't dislike the Deputy here, either, but if someone has to die, it'll be him."

"Makes you a rather clever man, to take advantage of my error, Paul."

"Sure it does. Sam—really now,

admit you had all the breaks and I had all the hard knocks. It wasn't a question of intelligence—just luck. Isn't that true?"

"Partly, I suppose. But how would you construe killing that man for his money—the crime that brought you in here—as bad luck?"

"If that easy mark hadn't flashed his roll, if he hadn't resisted, if my gun hadn't gone off, if a lot of things . . . then this wouldn't have happened. It's all luck, Sam. It's how the cards fall."

The Governor glanced over his shoulder at the wall clock. Paul followed his gaze. "There's a little time left, but not much, Sam."

"Paul, before we go into that, has it occurred to you that if I say no—then they're coming for you."

"They'll find a dead Deputy."

"But they'll kill you, Paul. They won't ask you to surrender. If the Deputy is dead, they'll shoot you down. You know that."

Paul's confident smile faded. "Maybe . . . maybe it'll come to that, but I don't think so. I've got you here too. A prison official is expendable, but not a Governor. I'll admit it now, Sam, that I was never so happy in my life as to see you walk in here. I should have demanded that you show, but I never once thought of it."

"Then I'm doomed too?"

"I'd hate to, but they can't execute me if I do."

"That's quite true! Frankly—I have you down as a rank coward. I'm sure if the law hadn't changed and you were led out of here down toward that . . . oak door . . . you'd be a sniveling wretch. Now keep quiet a moment—let me talk. It was never bad luck dogging your career—but cowardice. Lack of guts. You couldn't take it. You wanted things to go exactly right for you—and yet they never do for anyone. But for Paul Landers they had to—because if they didn't, you adopted any measures to get what you wanted. It led you here and very nearly got you surrounded by lethal gas."

Paul pursed his lips and nodded. "In a way, that's right, Sam. There's only one thing wrong with it. As of now, I've got a gun and I control what happens to me. To you and the Deputy as well. That puts me in charge. I'm on top and it's my brains that got me there. I figured out how this could be done and I'm doing it. I'm beginning to like the idea too. It makes me a rather big man and it deflates you, Governor."

"I'm merely disappointed, not deflated, Paul. And may I point out that you do not hold the upper hand. You're locked in here and it's impossible for you to get free unless the main lock controlled outside this block, is turned. You have a hostage. Two of them, in fact, but if you kill us, you'll still be here. There's no advantage."

"Isn't there? You say they'll come in shooting. They won't—be-

cause after I shoot, I'll throw my gun out of the cell and raise my arms and give up. They won't shoot down an unarmed, unresisting man. I'll be tried for two more murders, given two more life sentences. If I can serve one, I can serve three. They have to run concurrently, Governor. So now we've got it all settled and it's time to move. Let's hear how I go out of here."

"We still have a few moments to wait."

"For what?" The gun levelled again. "Sam, I swear I'll kill you if there are any tricks . . ."

"In a short time, the Warden will bring some papers to sign," the Governor explained. "You'll be legally free to walk out of here on a pardon."

"Don't give me that, Sam. I won't believe it."

"Have I ever lied?"

"No—I suppose not . . ."

"The Warden refused to open the gates. He was coming in with guns and gas. Under the law he has to do this, but I'm the Governor and I can legally pardon a man. Once you are safe and the Deputy is unharmed, then the pardon will be revoked. That way the Warden is covered and so am I. Let's at least be practical about this thing, Paul."

"Well, what do you know about that," Paul said. "I'm out-thought again by you. It's a clever idea, Governor. I congratulate you. I'll wait only a few more minutes, so I hope the papers are on their way."

They spent an additional ten minutes talking about the old days. The Governor kept it as light as possible because only in the enforced laughter and smiles, could he hide his anguish.

A door opened, slammed. The Governor looked down the length of death row. "It's the Warden," he said. "With the papers for me to sign."

Paul sat down on the bunk and put the muzzle of his gun against the Deputy's chest. "Let me see you sign them, Sam. And the Warden clears out as soon as you've signed."

"Exactly how I had it planned," the Governor said. He signalled the Warden. He studied the lengthy legal document for a few moments, nodded in approval of it and accepted the Warden's pen. He wrote his name and gave the papers and the pen back to the Warden.

"Thank you," he said. "We'll be finished here in a moment."

The Warden backed off. Paul waited until the door slammed shut. Then he flattened himself against the bars so he could see that the cell block was clear. The Governor walked into the opposite cell and picked up his dress coat.

"I'm ready," Paul said. "You're coming with me, Sam. I'm sorry, but you're much too valuable a hostage."

Mechanism clanked and the door lock opened. Paul swung the cell door wide and looked his elation.

"Let's go, Sam. Deputy, you walk ahead too . . ."

The Governor said, "Deputy—you go on alone . . ."

"Hold it!" Paul shouted.

"Paul," the Governor said quietly, "go back in your cell and sit down. Throw the gun away. It's of no value."

"A trick," Paul said. "A trick! I don't see it, but I should have known . . ."

"The Governor's Ball is attended by all the legislators, Paul. Before I came here, I ordered them back into session at the Capitol. They wrote a new bill, a two year moratorium on the death penalty just as before, but they added a rider which makes the death penalty mandatory if any inmate of a prison kills a guard or any law officer. I signed it a moment ago. It's now law. If you shoot us, you'll go through that oak door. You won't escape it by any loophole this time. Now what do you intend to do?"

Paul hurled the gun the length of the cell block. Then he walked into his cell, sat down and broke into convulsive sobs. The Governor looked in at him for a moment.

"I don't feel sorry for you, Paul. As a matter of fact, I hate you very much. You just made me lie. I said the papers were a pardon, not a new law. I'm not a liar. I detest liars, and you turned me into one even if only temporarily. Goodby, Paul. I'm sorry for you, even though I detest you. I'm always sorry for cowards and you've always been one."

His heels made squeaky noises as he walked down to the opening door at the end of the block. His tail coat swished noisily in the silence. Two guards moved past him to take charge of Paul.

ATTENTION, TEEN AGE SMOKERS!

Stay out of Salt Lake City if you can't get along without that cigarette! Anyone under 21 caught smoking in that city gets a ticket from the police (or did, some months ago) and has to either pay a fine or attend a two and a half hour school that features two color movies and a lecture on "The Evils of Tobacco".

Strict enforcement of the fifty-four year old law which prohibits smoking or possession of tobacco by anyone under 21 years of age, began this past summer. There is also a companion statute which makes it illegal to give, sell or provide tobacco to anyone under 21. Juvenile Judge Garff, who urged stricter enforcement of the law during the summer months so the program would be in full swing by the time school commenced, is described as particularly concerned by violations among teen-agers, and favors the lowering of the age limit to 18. Thirty-three states are said to have similar anti-smoking laws.

what's new in crime

by . . . Stefan Santesson

I BELIEVE readers of this column have noticed that I take a dim view of some trends which I feel do not belong in this field. Long long ago (or so it seems to me as I sit here thinking evil thoughts about the weather in New York) Milt Ozaki once asked aloud, at a meeting of the Chicago chapter of the Mystery Writers of America, whether I realized that S-E-X *really* was here to stay. I seem to recall answering that I had sort of gotten the impression that this was so, and that what I objected to was the manner in which some of these stories would be told, the appeal to half-hidden frustrations, the catering to those for whom this never-never land of Mike Hammer and his imitators represented the ultimate in escape. In other words (and I am afraid I have not changed in these last years), without ignoring the reality which faces us with our morning papers, I have nothing against the "slug 'em and slay 'em" school, but I do object to those writers who insist on sharing with their panting public their own dreams—their own nasty dreams, I should say—and their own frustrations. . . .

Mr. Santesson, editor of this magazine since 1956 and former editor, between 1945 and 1952, of the Unicorn Mystery Book Club, continues his column of comments on current mystery and suspense novels which, in their variety, illustrate his frequent insistence that it is impossible to generalize about the genre.

Let THE saint

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This is one reason why I was personally so pleased that Doubleday should reissue in one omnibus volume Margery Allingham 's THE GYRTH CHALICE MYSTERY, THE FASHION IN SHROUDS, and TRAITOR'S PURSE, as THREE CASES FOR MR. CAMPION (Doubleday, $4.50). The idea that a gentleman can be a detective—and Albert Campion is most certainly that!—seems to have gone out of fashion in these allegedly egalitarian days. Be that as it may, these thoroughly delightful novels should be reread by those of you who enjoyed them some years back, and read by those others among you for whom they will represent a discovery. I only have one complaint. . . . I stayed up much too late, the other night, reading two of these novels. . . .

The team that wrote as Manning Coles were responsible for several enjoyable Tommy Hambledon novels in the old days. If there was a choice between a new Manning Coles and a novel by, say X, you'd more than likely choose the new Coles. The passing of one of the original collaborators seems at first to have had little effect, but as you go further into SEARCH FOR A SULTAN (Doubleday, $2.95), you begin to miss that extra something, that half-suppressed chuckle, that was so much a part of the earlier Hambledon saga. They had a trick, when the going would be roughest (and let us not forget that some of the Hambledon novels came close to having a certain documentary quality . . .), and there would be that amused laugh—that has so little of the quality of an average laugh—as you watched Hambledon assess his chances of survival. Now, this time, there is still the same careful attention to detail in this story of the murder of the unpleasant "Achmed of Quathum" (*couldn't* they have hit upon a more convincing name?) but something is lacking, and you find yourself almost indifferent to the fate of the equally unpleasant man who had schemed so long, and was to gain so little. . . .

Alex Gordon's THE CIPHER (Simon & Schuster, $3.50), modestly described by the publishers as "loaded with the dramatic suspense of a time bomb", could also have been more effective. It is astonishing, in fact, how little has been made of the opportunities presented by this unhappy archaeologist's involvement in Middle Eastern politics. I have no doubt that many will find the action and intrigue which Alex Gordon writes about both real and convincing. I am afraid I don't—largely because these people, the Beshraavis and the others, never quite seem to come to life, and never quite cease to be the papier mâché creations of a writer who obviously has never known their cousins. Or gives that impression. . . .

the hands of death

by . . . Bruno Fischer

RAIN CAME DOWN as if dumped out of a cauldron. Most drivers on that Connecticut highway pulled off the road to wait out the worst part of the storm. But Lester Miles kept driving. He would not permit a mere cloudburst to hold him up.

One other car was moving—a convertible which showed a barely distinguishable New Jersey license plate.

Momentarily the convertible vanished in a spray of water. Lester braked his coupé, stopped at the edge of what was virtually a lake formed by the rain. Water completely covered the road and spread out over the grass on either side. The convertible was in the midst of the flood, and the impotent whirr of the starter told Lester the car was stuck.

He heeded the warning, remained where he was.

The midsummer storm tapered off, the sun burst bright and hot. Traffic tried to move, but the convertible was blocking half the road. Horns on the right lane honked impatiently.

The starter continued to whirr with a kind of frenzy. The motor

Bruno Fischer, veteran mystery novelist, makes one of his rare appearances in these pages with this novelet about a girl who first claimed she was running away from her husband—and then it was obvious she really meant she was fleeing Death . . .

Originally published as THE HANDS OF MR. PRESCOTT in the March 1949 issue of *Popular Detective*. Copyright 1949 by Better Publications, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the author and the author's agent, Mr. August Lenniger.

probably wouldn't catch for hours because the wires were wet.

The right door opened. A young man's face under a pulled-down slouch hat looked out.

"Mind pushing me off the road?" he asked Lester.

Lester nudged the car over the shoulder of the road. Traffic began to crawl past him. He backed up, swung around the convertible.

"Can you give me a lift?" the young man called.

"Sure," Lester said.

The young man opened the car door and recklessly stepped into water almost to his knees. He reached back into the convertible, brought out a small weekend bag, waded to the coupé and climbed in.

"Thanks," he said. "I'd appreciate it you'll drive me as far as a service station where I can get a mechanic."

His voice was curiously low and deep. His face didn't go with that voice. He was young, handsome. No, not exactly handsome, Lester decided, because he was much too pretty for a man. The mouth was small, the black eyes surprisingly large, the black lashes unusually long.

"We were both dopes to drive in that cloudburst," Lester Miles said. "If I hadn't seen what happened to your car, I'd have gone through that puddle myself."

His passenger placed his small bag carefully between his feet.

"I noticed your New York license plate," he said. "Are you going far?"

"Southern New Hampshire. Spending a week-end at my sister's place near Keene, fifty or sixty miles south-west of Concord."

The boy was soaked.

"I'm dripping water all over your car," he apologized, and as he turned his face to the right window Lester saw that his black hair curled thickly at the nape of his neck.

"Listen," he said. "I'd appreciate it if you'd give me a lift as far as you go."

"All the way to Keene? What about your car?"

"I'll phone the state police on the way. It's now past six. I'd like to reach my—my brother's house—in Concord before midnight. Please!"

His voice changed on that "please." It was suddenly thinner, higher, and somehow made Lester uneasy. That slouch hat was pulled down low. Although it was a stifling day, he wore a tweed suit, the jacket buttoned, the necktie knotted tightly.

There was something decidedly wrong about him.

"Are you in any kind of trouble?" Lester asked sharply.

The boy laughed. Or tried to laugh. Then he sat back, his hands folded.

"I suppose you could call it trouble," he said. "My name is Ed Brown. It seems crazy to leave a

good car behind, but my brother is sick and alone and I must get to him in a hurry."

Lester kept shifting his eyes from the road to the boy's hands. They were small, delicate, the fingernails as carefully manicured as a woman's.

"That's not such a hot disguise," Lester said drily. "I should have spotted you as a girl at once."

The face was quickly averted. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Your small hands and feet," Lester said. "Your smooth skin. The way you try to make your voice deep. You're running away from something?"

The girl sighed wearily. When she spoke, her voice was feminine. "It's a good enough disguise if I'm seen in a car from a distance."

"Are you running from the police?" Lester asked.

"Oh, no" She twisted to face him. "Please! You've got to help me!"

She was all woman now, appealing to a man. He didn't care for it. All he wanted was his week-end away from sweltering New York and his job as accountant for an insurance firm. Here was somebody trying to complicate things, the way women always did.

"Suppose you tell me about it."

"I can't."

"I see," he said crisply. "You're afraid I'll turn you over to the police."

"I just can't explain now." She placed a soft hand on his hand. "I won't mind if you do call the police, if you'll drive me to my brother's home first."

"All the way to Concord?"

"It's sixteen miles east of Concord. It will take you less than two hours out of your way. My brother will pay you well."

"No!" he said angrily. "I'm not in the business of helping girls escape."

"I'm sorry I mentioned money. Help me because I'm in trouble."

Lester's teeth were caught in his lower lip. He was sweating, but not because of the heat. Still, if he was to believe all the stories he'd read what red-blooded man would refuse to help a fair lady in distress? But he wasn't a hero. He just wanted to be let alone.

He felt her shift closer to him, felt her hand touch his arm.

"You're strong," she said. "And your face is pleasantly rugged."

"When a woman wants something from a man, she flatters him," he said disgustedly.

They were driving through open country, with tobacco fields, on either side. However he felt about her, she was on his hands. The only way he could get her off his hands was by kicking her out of the car.

He didn't. "You're name isn't Ed Brown, of course," he said, "but I bet your initials are E.B."

"Ellen," she muttered.

"What does the B stand for?" he said.

Her face was turned to the window. "Just call me Ellen."

At ten minutes to seven, they passed into Massachusetts. Ellen sat huddled in the corner of the seat, looking small and pathetic in those men's clothes. He felt an urge to say something to her, but he only drove on at a moderate rate of speed.

"Can't you go faster?" she asked once.

"Sure I can, but I'm in no hurry. I'm not running away from anything."

She didn't argue.

After another twenty miles he pulled into a service station. Ellen abruptly sat upright.

"Why are you stopping?" she demanded.

"I need gas."

He got out of the coupé, and handed the attendant the gas tank key.

"Fill 'er up!" he said, then walked a bit, stretching his long legs. When he returned to the car, Ellen was no longer there.

"She's run out on me," he thought, and was surprised to find that he was not relieved.

He moved closer against the car, and saw her. She was cowering so low that her man's hat was not visible.

And then he saw the State Police car. It had pulled into the service station within the last minute or two. A trooper was standing near the hood, his thumbs hooked in his gun-belt. He was speaking to a man with unruly red hair.

Here, Lester told himself, was his chance to do his duty as a law-abiding citizen. He had only to tell the state cop about the girl in his car.

The trooper looked directly at him. Lester pulled air into his lungs. The trooper returned his attention to the red-headed man.

"Very pretty," the red-headed man was saying. "About twenty-three. Black eyes and hair. She abandoned her car near Treeport."

"That's in Connecticut," the trooper said. "What makes you think she's headed this way?"

"I know where she's bound," the red-headed man replied. He was squat, as broad in the shoulders as Lester, but a full head shorter. "In fact, I know—"

He broke off, his gaze on Lester who obviously was listening. "This any of your business, mister?" he asked drily.

Lester flushed. He dropped his cigarette, stepped on it, moved toward the rear of his coupé. He tried to act casual, but his heart was thumping.

The attendant was locking the gas tank. Lester paid him, and got behind the wheel. The red-headed man was moving toward a blue coupé with a New Jersey license plate.

Lester swung out on the high-

way. Ellen might have been a bundle of old clothes piled on the floor.

After a minute he said: "Which one are you afraid of most—the state cop or the red-headed man?"

Ellen got up off the floor.

"That red-haired man is my husband," she said. "I'm running away from him and he wants to bring me back."

"What part of New Jersey do you come from?"

"The southern tip. A small town you never heard of."

"That's not a good lie," he said more in disgust than anger. "His car comes from Coast City, just across the river from New York. And there's no law against a wife leaving her husband. You wouldn't disguise yourself as a man. You wouldn't be as scared as you are."

"All right, he isn't my husband," she said after a silent moment. "I'm not married, and I'm not running away from anybody," she said.

"You're giving a good imitation of it."

She put a hand on his arm. "You didn't give me away when you could have. I'll never stop being grateful to you."

Lester scowled at the road. By keeping his mouth shut at the service station, he had let himself into something up to his neck. He wished he knew what it was.

Suddenly Ellen crouched in the seat. Lester glanced into his mirror, and he saw the blue coupé coming up rapidly behind him.

His hands tightened on the wheel. A horn honked. The blue coupé, with the red-haired man behind the wheel, drew even with him.

Then it was past.

Lester felt his lungs expand. Ellen straightened up as the blue coupé rounded a curve out of sight.

"Suppose he knew you were in the car with me?" Lester said slowly. "What would he do?"

"I'm not sure."

"He looks tough."

"He is." Her tone was confidently feminine now. "But you're not afraid."

"Oh, no," he said bitterly. "I'm a terrific hero. Only I'd feel better if I knew what I'm not afraid of."

"Nothing, really," she lied blandly. "You are going to drive me to North Paris?"

"I thought you were headed for Concord."

"I said a small town west of Concord. That's North Paris."

He supposed he should be afraid of the red-headed man, and he *was* afraid of what he didn't know. But here he was, burdened with this girl, and oddly enough, he was minding it less and less.

"All right, I'm a sucker," he said. "In a short while we'll come to the turn-off which will lead us into Concord."

"They'll keep all the roads to Concord covered," she said.

"They?" he said. "How many are there besides the red-headed man?"

Ellen stared out of the window. "I don't know," she muttered. "I suppose they're farther north than we are now, and watching all roads, but I think we can slip through because they don't know your car and my disguise is good enough. They'll suspect us less if you go the long way, through Keene."

He shrugged. "Okay. It's your party."

They were three-quarters of the way across Massachusetts when dusk spread before the windshield. Lester snapped on the parking lights, then saw with surprise that it was twenty minutes after eight.

"No wonder I'm hungry," he said. "You must be, too."

She stirred. "Please! Let's not stop till we get there."

He was annoyed with her, annoyed with the entire situation.

"I'm starved," he told her crisply, "and it's still a long drive. You can stay in the car if you want to."

Again she didn't argue.

A few miles farther a neon sign blinked. "RESTAURANT," it announced. He pulled in, yanked the keys out of the ignition lock, and got out.

"I'll bring a sandwich for you," he said.

"Wait!" She reached behind the seat, pulled up her weekend bag, opened the door on her side. "I suppose I can risk it. I haven't eaten since breakfast, and I feel faint."

He watched her walk around the car. She was tall for a woman, and slim in the hips. He wondered how she would look in a dress and without that ridiculous hat.

He frowned at the bag she carried.

"Do you mind locking this in the car trunk?" she said.

"I'm going to lock the doors while we're in the restaurant."

"The trunk is safer."

"What's in the bag that's so valuable?"

"Please!" she said.

He shrugged. This was the smallest favor she had so far asked him. He took the bag, unlocked the trunk and placed the bag on top of his pigskin two-suiter. As he was lowering the trunk, he felt the pressure of her against him. He dropped the key in his pocket and turned to her. All at once she was sagging in his arms.

Even in those man's clothes, even with the brim of that hat against his chin, she felt very much a woman. She clung to him with a kind of despair then abruptly pulled away.

"I—I'm sorry," she said. "Suddenly I was so tired. It's been a—a hard day."

His heart went out to her. He wanted to hold her again, comfort her, but they were out in the open.

They entered the restaurant.

A buxom blonde took their orders for roast beef dinners. Ellen was trying to be a man again, speaking huskily, and she had to wear her hat.

While they waited for the food, Ellen's hands were never still. They fumbled with a spoon, plucked at a jacket button. Seeing him gaze at her, she smiled wryly, but she didn't really look at him. Her eyes were haunted, staring at ghosts.

He thought of how she had clung to him outside, almost as if he were the only one in the world on her side. Was he on her side? He supposed so. He had made his choice back at that service station when he had said nothing to the state trooper.

Clam chowder was set before them. Ellen spooned it up eagerly. He was hungry himself. After the chowder both silently dug into the roast beef.

A stifled cry brought his head up sharply.

Ellen had half-risen, was staring past him.

Lester twisted his head. Two men had just entered. One was short and slim. He wore a garish yellow polo shirt and blue slacks and was smoking a cigar. The other man was enormous. His shapeless pin-stripe suit looked like a sack. He was fanning his florid, overheated face with a straw hat.

The little man glanced toward the table. His eyes met Lester's impassively, then shifted to his oversized companion who was already seated at the counter. He swung himself up on an adjoining stool.

Ellen was concentrating on her food.

"Who are they?" Lester whispered.

She spoke as if to herself. "How did they find me here? Oh, they're so clever and desperate, have so many resources. They knew I was here."

They were looking at her now. They had ordered only drinks, and they sat at the counter with their faces turned toward Lester and Ellen.

"What do you think they'll do?" he asked her.

Her head remained lowered, as if still hoping that if she did not lift her face they would not know who she was.

"Anything," she replied hoarsely. "But they won't hurt you."

Through the mirror, Lester saw the little man rise from the counter stool. His drink was only half-finished.

Lester's fingers dug into his palms. Something was going to happen. Ellen's assurance that he was out of it didn't mean anything. He was in it; she had put him in it.

But there were plenty of people in the restaurant to prevent anything from happening here. While he and Ellen stayed here, she would be safe.

Maybe.

The little man was no longer visible in the mirror. Lester twisted in his chair to see the door swinging shut. He had gone outside.

The big man put down his empty glass and rose ponderously from the stool. He grinned at Lester, and sauntered toward him.

Lester turned back to Ellen. She wasn't at the table. His eyes darted about the room, searching for her.

"You won't find her," a soft voice said. "She scooted out through that side door."

Lester looked up at the big man standing beside the table. His mouth was dry. He couldn't think of anything to say.

The big man didn't seem to be disturbed by her flight. He lowered himself in Ellen's chair, dug out a pack of cigarettes, offered Lester one. Lester just stared at him.

"You look nervous," the big man drawled. "You needn't be if you're an innocent bystander, as I suspect you are." He held the flame of a lighter to his cigarette. "I doubt if you ever saw Ellen Bronson before a few hours ago."

"Is that her name?" Lester said, forcing himself to sound casual.

"You refer to *her,* which means her disguise didn't fool you." The big man studied him. "May I know who you are?"

"That's none of your business!" Lester was surprised at the controlled anger in his tone.

The big man grinned boyishly. "Take it easy. I'd like to discuss a small matter of business."

He sounded sure of himself, and he wasn't worried about Ellen having fled. That was because the little man was outside, to intercept her.

Lester got to his feet.

"Sit down," the big man drawled.

Lester knew that stepping out of this restaurant meant stepping into danger. He had little doubt that the big man had a gun.

"A hundred dollars is yours and you won't be hurt," the big man whispered. "Otherwise—"

Lester stood with his knuckles pressed down on the table and remembered how Ellen had clung to him, how she needed him. Then he was moving to the counter. He handed the man behind the counter a five-dollar bill.

"For two dinners," he said. "The rest is a tip." He turned to the door.

The big man was coming after him, waddling in his hurry. When Lester was through the door, the big man was at his heels.

"I'll make it two hundred dollars," the big man said. "All you have to do is unlock your car trunk."

Now twilight had deepened into dark-grayness. There was nobody in front of the building, but a fourth car, a two-toned green sedan, was parked beside Lester's coupé. It had a New Jersey license plate. Doubtless that meant that the little man and Ellen were still around.

"It's an easy way to earn two hundred dollars," the big man urged.

"And what will you do to Ellen Bronson?" asked Lester.

"Not a thing unless you compel us to get tough." The softness left the big fellow's voice. "Then you'll lose two hundred dollars and get hurt in the bargain. Badly hurt."

"Blast you!" Lester blazed at him. "What do you think I am?"

The big man sighed. "You asked for it," he said, and threw a punch at Lester's face.

Instinctively Lester sidestepped and caught the blow on his left shoulder. It spun him halfway around. If it had hit the target he would be down and out. The big man was pulling his powerhouse left back for another try.

Lester stepped in under the second punch and sank his fist up to the waist in that fatty midriff. The big man grunted and doubled over. Suddenly Lester was calm, calculating. He knew what to do; he had done it often enough in the YMCA gym. He straightened his opponent up with a vicious uppercut.

The big man tottered. He looked surprised. He brought his hands up to defend his face, and Lester let him have another in the midriff. The man's guard dropped, and Lester swung with all he had into that beefy face.

The big man went down and lay still.

Incredulously Lester stared down at that unconscious mound of man. It was the first time in his life that he had ever struck a blow without boxing gloves, or in anger. He felt a sense of power. He hadn't wanted to start anything. He had wanted to be left alone. They had made him fight.

All right, he was fighting.

He looked back at the restaurant. Nobody had heard the fight. He walked to the far side of the restaurant, paused at the corner.

Trees ran to within fifty feet of that side of the building. Ellen was hardly more than a shadow against the solid background of the trees, but the little man's yellow sport shirt made him visible. They were talking, but their voices were so low that no words reached Lester.

His shoes made no sound on the grass as he walked toward them. The little man's back was turned to him and all Ellen's attention was concentrated on the man.

When Lester was within twenty feet of them, he could hear what they were saying.

"I hid it in Connecticut when I passed through," Ellen was saying.

The little man shook his head. "You could have hidden it more easily in Coast City. You didn't dare because you knew we would force you to tell us where. It could have been simple—merely let Digger and his knife spend a little time on you."

Ellen's voice was dull. "I knew you were following me, so I hid it."

"You did not. You were disguised and not using your own car. If you had left Coast City at once, we might not have been able to catch up with you. But you waited

to borrow Mary Hatch's car and dress yourself in her husband's clothes." He chuckled. "You know of our resources. We were only a few minutes behind every move you made to Coast City. We reached Mary Hatch just after you had driven off in her car. I am afraid, my dear, that we frightened her."

"You hurt her?" Ellen gasped.

"No. But she told us that you were in her car and disguised as a man. We knew, of course, where you were headed with the bag, and I had already sent men ahead to watch every road in New England. Late this afternoon one of my men spotted your car west of Hartford. In broad daylight and in the midst of traffic, he dared do nothing but tail you. There was a rainstorm and your car got stuck and he saw you change into another car. From there on we were in constant telephone communication with each other. As you drove across Massachusetts, the net drew tight. Carter and I preferred to handle the matter ourselves. That was why you were allowed to come this far."

"You don't even trust your own men," she sneered.

"Ellen, my dear." the little man replied affably, "neither of us trust anybody."

Then Lester saw the gun. A three-quarters moon broke through a rift in clouds, and moonlight glinted on the nickel stock. The man held it against his right hip.

"Why all this talking?" Ellen said. "You're holding me here while Carter does something?"

"My dear," the little man said, 'I prefer non-violent methods. Carter is working on the man who gave you a lift. Carter will offer him money to unlock his car. If that does not work, Carter will use the persuasive power of a gun."

"And if it's not in the car?"

"You will tell us where it is, Ellen. You know I cannot afford to let anything stop me."

"And what do you think my brother will do when he finds out?"

"Your brother knows nothing. If you had been able to communicate with him, you would have hidden in Coast City and let him come to you. I know his New Hampshire country place. There is no electric, no telephone, no modern conveniences. You could not communicate with him except by mail, so you realized that the quickest way was to drive out to him."

"If you get the bag, will you let me go?" Ellen asked.

"That remains to be seen."

In other words, Lester thought, the answer was no. Giving them the bag would not save Ellen. And big Carter would not remain out cold much longer, if he hadn't already recovered consciousness.

Lester started toward the two shapes against the trees.

"I wonder what's taking Carter so long?" the little man said,

turned his head, and looked directly at Lester. For an instant the man stood motionless, as if uncertain who Lester was. Then he swung all the way around, his right hand thrusting out from his body.

His gun! Lester hurled himself forward.

Ellen's shape merged with that of the little man. His right hand was no longer out-thrust. He was writhing to break Ellen's grip on his arm.

Lester swung at the fellow's jaw, connected solidly. The little man went down to his knees. Ellen released him and he fell over on his side.

"Two!" Lester thought with a strange exultation.

But this man wasn't quite out. He was squirming on the ground, struggling to bring his gun to bear on Lester.

Lester stepped on the man's right wrist, pinning it to the ground. He stooped to pluck the gun from him. The grip held tenaciously on the trigger guard. Lester ground his heel into the wrist, the man moaned, and his fingers loosened. Lester straightened up with the gun, a small-caliber automatic.

Ellen was running toward the restaurant.

"Ellen!" he shouted.

She disappeared around the corner of the building. Lester started to follow and almost fell on his face. A hand had closed around his ankle, tugging feebly, trying to pull him down. The little man was groggy from the blow and his gun had been taken away from him, but there was still fight in him.

With a viscous yank, Lester freed his ankle and ran.

"I'll give you a thousand dollars!" the little man called after him thickly.

Lester kept going. He was halfway to the building when he heard a motor spring into life.

"Ellen!"

Behind him the little man was saying brokenly:

"Five thousand! You crazy fool! Five thousand dollars!"

Lester's pace didn't lessen. Headlights glared at him when he reached the corner of the building. One of the four cars was being backed out of the parking space. The light in his eyes prevented him from seeing which one it was.

The car straightened out, shot forward, roaring in first speed. A huge human shape appeared around one of the parked cars, lurching after the moving car.

The car shot by Lester, and by its dashlight he saw Ellen Bronson behind the wheel.

It was his own coupé.

Lester stood rooted to the spot. There had been a nightmarish quality about the last ten minutes, and this was the most incredible part. How could Ellen have driven away in his car when it was locked and the keys were in his pocket?

His hand dug into the pocket. It was empty. The other jacket pocket contained only cigarettes and matches. He searched his trousers pockets. No keys.

Ellen had them. She had lifted them from him when she had clung to him as if weary, as if needing him to hold her.

Sucker! His mouth went tight with bitterness. He had done everything she had asked him. He had not given her away, but instead he had risked his life for her. This was her gratitude. From the first she had planned to steal his car, with her bag in it.

She hadn't trusted him. He recalled that the little man had said: "Neither of us trusts anybody."

He had lost more than his car. He had lost somebody who had come to mean a lot to him.

"What's all the commotion out here!"

The counterman was standing in the restaurant doorway.

Lester became acutely aware of the gun in his own hand. He wasn't sure what to tell the counterman.

Carter had returned from the road.

"This gentleman had a quarrel with his wife and she ran out on him," he called to the counterman. "She drove off in his car."

It was as good a story as any. With Ellen and the bag gone, the two men would have nothing against him, unless they bore a grudge because he had struck them. But he had a gun now, with which to protect himself.

"Glad I'm single," the counterman said. He stepped back and closed the door.

Carter strode over to Lester. He stared angrily at the gun.

"What'd you do to Neale?" he demanded.

That would be the little man. Carter the big one, Neale the little one.

"The same thing I did to you." Lester said. "I hit him."

Carter fingered his jaw. "Brother, I'd like to get you into a fair fight."

"Our fight was fair."

"The devil it was!"

The nightmarish quality persisted. It could only be in a nightmare that at a time like this two grown men squabbled like children over which one was better with his fists. And what, Lester wondered, did he do now? Report to the police that Ellen Bronson had stolen his car?

Even now he wasn't sure he wanted to get the police after her. He was still a sucker.

By now the little man named Neale had appeared. A few minutes ago he had hysterically offered Lester a five thousand dollar bribe, but now he did not appear to be disturbed by anything that had happened. In his yellow shirt and blue slacks, he looked like a tourist taking a languid walk.

"Ellen got away in this guy's car," Carter growled.

"I saw her." Neale smiled bleakly. "You disappoint me, Carter."

"It wasn't my fault. He knocked me out." Carter's huge hand went gingerly to his jaw. "He socked me when I—"

"Can it!" Neale snapped. "You didn't have to try using your fists when so much was at stake."

Carter jabbed a thick finger toward Lester. "He's not just an innocent bystander. He turned down two hundred dollars. He'd given her his car keys. And he's carrying a gun."

"It happens to be my gun," Neale said placidly. He extended a hand, palm up, to Lester. "May I have it back?"

"No."

He didn't know what he was going to do. Probably simply walk away. But he had an idea he needed a gun to do even that.

Calmly Neale's gaze went over him. "I don't think I've ever seen you. Your car license says you're a New Yorker. It looked as if you picked Ellen Bronson up by accident. But, as Carter pointed out, you don't act like an innocent bystander."

"I was," Lester said tightly. "But you changed that."

"I think you'd better drop that gun," Carter said softly.

The voice was close to Lester's left ear, and he felt the pressure of something hard against his left side.

Too late Lester realized the mistake he'd made by ignoring Carter for even a moment. Because Carter had a gun. He hadn't shown it because he had believed that his fists would be sufficient—that he would knock Lester out and take the car keys from him. During the fist fight he hadn't had a chance to draw a gun.

Now it was sticking into Lester's ribs.

"Drop it, mister," Carter said again.

Lester let the automatic fall to the ground. Neale picked it up.

"There's another reason I know you're in this with Ellen," Neale told him affably. "I offered you five grand and you turned it down. No man who hadn't a reason would turn down that much money.

Lester knew there was no use trying to explain. Men like these wouldn't understand anybody turning down money to save a girl who had lied to him and betrayed him. He wondered if they intended to kill him here.

"Meanwhile Ellen's making miles," Carter said impatiently.

"Not so many," Neale told him. He smiled wryly at Lester. "What do you know, mister?"

"Nothing," Lester said.

Carter was chewing nervously on his thick lower lip. "Let's get out of here," he growled.

"With our friend, of course." Neale held his gun close to his belt so that it wouldn't be obvious to anybody looking from the restaurant or to a passing motorist.

"Open the door of that sedan and get in."

Did they mean to take him where they could kill him unobserved? Desperately Lester's eyes shifted, and he saw a man step jauntily around the two-toned green sedan.

He was the stocky, red-headed man who had asked the state trooper about Ellen miles back at the service station. Negligently his right hand rested at the knot of his necktie, and without knowing quite why, Lester was sure that gesture was menacing.

"Good-evening, gentlemen," the red-headed man said affably.

Carter made a strangled sound in his throat. His lower lip started to quiver like that of a child about to burst into tears. He seemed to forget that he and Neale held guns while both the red-headed man's hands were visible and empty.

Neale only scowled darkly. "What are you doing here, Captain?" he demanded.

"Could be the same thing you are." The red-headed man turned a friendly smile to Lester Miles. "I've got my car parked a little way down the road. I'll be glad to give you a lift, Mr. Miles."

Lester blinked at him. He hadn't told any of them his name.

"Miles, eh?" Neale grunted. "Friend of yours, Captain?"

"This is the first time I've ever spoken to him." The man called "Captain" leaned against the front fender of the sedan. His hand remained at his necktie. "I phoned the New York Vehicles Bureau and gave them the number of his license plate. They told me his name was Lester Miles and that he lived on West One-hundred and Ninety-third Street in New York. I like to know with whom I'm dealing."

"What are you after?" Carter asked hoarsely.

"To begin with, your guns," the Captain replied blandly. "Miles, please collect them."

Lester stared at him in bewilderment. Carter and Neale had their guns trained on him, but the red-headed man was acting as if he had complete control of the situation.

"Don't let them worry you," the Captain told Lester. "I doubt if they'd care to risk any shooting here in the open. Shots will attract people in the restaurant and they'll see the number of Neale's car. Not even George Neale can come into Massachusetts and murder people in public."

"I can shoot in self-defense," Neale said softly.

"You might if my back were turned." The Captain's hand flattened against his deep chest, the fingers extended toward his left armpit.

"You know I have a gun in my shoulder-clip. You know I can burn down both of you before you remember there are triggers on your guns. You and Carter are only go-

ing through the motions of being bold, bad men. I'm the real thing."

He said that without bravado. His assurance was somehow deadlier than anything in Lester's experience. He shivered a little, even though the man appeared to be on his side.

"I've never liked you, Carter," the Captain said. "I'm not sure I'd mind shooting you. You'll give me a chance to find out if you don't drop your gun."

Carter's huge body sagged.

"Don't shoot!" he moaned, and his right hand opened and his gun fell to the ground.

"Curse you, Carter!" Neale said. "He had no chance against two guns. You yellow rat!"

The Captain nodded in amiable agreement. "Sure, he's yellow. You're not, Neale. You're smart, which will make you do the same thing. Take his gun, Miles."

Lester hadn't stirred since the red-headed man had appeared. Now he roused himself as if from a dream. He stooped for the gun which Carter had dropped, then moved to Neale's side and plucked the man's gun from his unresisting fingers.

"You were asked several times, Captain," Neale said. "What are you doing here?"

"Could it be I'm looking for a little week-end bag Ellen Bronson took with her from Coast City?"

"You know?" Carter said in a stricken voice.

"It's my job to know," the Captain said. "Miles, I'll take those two guns, if you don't mind."

Lester stepped over to the Captain's side. A large, freckled hand accepted both guns and thrust them into his jacket pocket. It was only then that the Captain removed his right hand from his necktie."

"Captain," Neale said, "you've played ball with me in the past. I've had an eye on you for the commissioner's job."

"Thanks," the Captain said drily, "but a few minutes ago I found out I'm not your kind of commissioner. I've done a lot of dirty work in my day, but I couldn't stand by and see you murder Miles."

"I didn't intend to harm him."

The Captain smiled sourly and said to Lester: "Let's go."

They moved to the green sedan. When the Captain reached the left rear tire, he pulled a clasp knife out of a pocket and opened the blade. Silently Neale and Carter watched him slash the tire, and Lester felt even more acutely than before the deadly menace of that squat, red-headed man.

Air gushed out of the tire. The Captain straightened up and closed his knife.

"To keep you gentlemen out of our hair for at least a few minutes," he told them.

"You'll regret this, Captain," Neale said in cold fury.

"One of us will, that's sure," the Captain replied indifferently.

He moved to the road. Lester followed. They walked south.

"This is terrible!" Lester heard Carter wail. "How did Radin find out?"

"You yellow rat!" Neale said to the big man.

Beyond the lights of the restaurant, the Captain took a flashlight from his hip pocket. The blue coupé with the New Jersey plate was parked a couple of hundred feet below the restaurant. Lester got in beside the Captain.

Before starting, the Captain removed the two extra guns from his pocket, shoved them into the glove compartment, locked it.

"Guns in any pocket but mine make me nervous," he commented.

That was sheer mockery. Lester didn't believe that the man had a nerve in his body.

"Are you going after Ellen Bronson?" Lester asked, when the car was moving.

"Of course." The Captain seemed surprised at the question. "I've been going after her for hours."

They passed Neale and Carter brooding over the flat tire.

"They've an organization," Lester said. "They've all the roads guarded. I heard Neale say she won't get far."

"Uh-huh. Let's hope we haven't wasted too much time."

"We?"

The Captain gave him a sidelong glance. "If you want to walk out, Miles, I'll stop the car. I'll see to it that your stolen car is returned to you."

Lester drew in his breath. "I'll see it through."

"That's all right. Only I wonder if you know what there is to see through."

"I admit I'm scared," Lester said. "For a while I thought that there were just some gangsters involved. That would have been bad enough. But this thing is big because the men in it are big. You're a police captain, aren't you?"

"Uh-huh. John Radin, head of Coast City Homicide."

"And Neale offered to make you police commissioner if you played ball with him. You called him George Neale. Everybody's heard of George Neale, the political boss of Coast City. Who's Carter?"

"Vincent Carter, an assistant district attorney."

Lester sat peering at the dark, winding road for sight of his car.

"Big shots," he said bitterly. "Law enforcement officials. I'd feel safer with cutthroats."

"We're in Massachusetts now. Whatever weight we throw around in Coast City, we're on our own here."

"There's been a lot these days about George Neale in the New York newspapers," Lester said. "For the first time in twenty years he's having a fight on his hands for control of Coast City. There's a man named Preston or something fighting him."

"Harold Prescott," Captain Radin told him. "Head of the Citizens League. He's going to run for mayor against Neale's man this November, and there's a better than even chance he'll get elected. He's on of those do-gooders."

The sneer in Radin's voice annoyed Lester. "You wouldn't care for do-gooders. You couldn't have become a police captain without Neale's backing. Probably you'll be fired when Prescott gets in."

"Uh-huh. And now that I got on the wrong side of Neale, I'll lose my job no matter who wins."

"I'm grateful," Lester said quickly. "You sacrificed your career for me."

"That's what I get for being soft." Radin replied mockingly. "But don't worry about this baby. I've a habit of looking out for myself."

Captain Radin was driving at sixty-five, hardly slowing down at curves. Whenever they approached a car, Lester was alert to see whether it was his, but he caught no sight of it.

"What's in Ellen's week-end bag must be valuable to make everybody concerned so desperate," he said to Radin.

"Could be to the right person," the Homicide man told him. "I don't suppose Ellen gave you a hint of what was in it?"

"No."

"I guess she couldn't. You'd yell for the nearest cop." Radin frowned at the road. "Early this morning I was on a homicide case on the waterfront. The body was badly mangled. While I was looking into this I heard that George Neale was turning the town upside down looking for Ellen Bronson. Neale has a crowd of mugs, but for this job he needed police experience.

"That's how I got onto it. I wasn't far behind a couple of men Neale sent to visit a Mary Hatch. She was hysterical. They had just made her tell them that Ellen had borrowed her car and her husband's clothes. I figured Ellen would head for her brother's place in New Hampshire.

"In Connecticut I found her abandoned car. The rest was a break. Shortly after I pulled out of a service station, I passed a car—your car. I saw a man in it, but when I was past, through my mirror I saw another man straighten up. I pulled over to a side road and watched your car pass, and the second man looked a lot like Ellen Bronson. So I tailed the car."

"But you didn't stop us," Lester said drily. "You were waiting for an opportunity to steal the bag."

Captain Radin's hard mouth tightened in the ghost of a smile. "As a Coast City cop I had no jurisdiction to stop her in this state. When you parked at that restaurant I parked back off the road."

"And found that the bag was locked in the car's trunk."

"Uh-huh. Let's say it was my du-

ty to take it back to Coast City. Now forcing a car trunk lock isn't easy when you can be seen from the restaurant or the road. I figured on waiting for Ellen and waving a gun at her. I knew I had time. I walked to a service station a quarter of a mile back and phoned the New York License Bureau to find out who owned that New York car—your car. When I got back, I saw Neale's car outside the restaurant.

"I kept under cover. I saw you knock out Carter. That's a nice sock you have, Miles. I skirted the woods to see what was with Neale and Ellen. I was standing behind a tree when you smacked Neale and took his gun. I couldn't stop Ellen from getting away, because I didn't know she had your car keys until it was too late. How'd you happen to give them to her?"

"She stole them," Miles said sourly.

Radin nodded. "Smart girl, Ellen. She drove away. I was working back to my car to chase after Ellen when I saw that Neale and Carter had the drop on you, going to force you into their car. That was a bit too much to stand by and watch."

"Did you think they were going to kill me?"

Neale figured you knew too much. He's skating on thin ice. What would he have to lose by getting rid of you?"

"And what did you have to gain by saving me?"

Captain Radin grinned. "Not a thing. I'm getting soft. Any year now I'll become a do-gooder like Harold Prescott."

There were no towns, no houses, no farms. Moonlight vaguely showed hills in the north, and in the south were fields and woods. Lester, remembering the map, thought that they were not far from the Connecticut River.

Radin frowned at the road.

"Do you think she turned off somewhere? Lester asked.

"I doubt it. She'd figure that side roads would delay her, and she's in a hurry."

"The roads ahead are being watched."

"We know that. Does Ellen? I'll lay odds she took the most direct road to North Paris."

"What will make her safer when she's with her brother?" asked Lester.

The dashlight showed a wry smile on Radin's lips.

"Her brother is quite a guy," he said. "Safer to keep him out of it. But if there's no choice—" Abruptly his square jaw ridged. "Look, Miles. If anything goes wrong, it may be a good idea for an outsider to know a little. What's in that bag belongs to Harold Prescott."

"What is it?" Lester asked.

"Probably I've told you too much already. That's all you'll have to know—if things go wrong."

Radin suddenly came down hard on the brakes. The car came to a shuddering halt.

"Did you see them?" Radin said.

"Who?"

"Two cars off the road. On the left side."

Radin was backing up. A car approached, he waited for it to pass, then resumed easing his coupé backward until his headlights shone fully on two cars parked past the shoulder of the road.

"My car!" Lester yelled.

"We're too late," Radin said.

He parked next to Lester's coupé. The car on the other side of it was a two-door sedan—from New Jersey.

Lester leaped out, pulled open the door of his car, but found nothing.

"Here's something," Radin called.

He was at the rear of Lester's coupé, his flashlight focused on the trunk.

"Keys in the lock," Radin pointed out. "Your keys, I suppose."

The three keys, including the trunk key, were still attached to the leather key-case. Lester nodded and raised the trunk lid.

His pigskin bag was in there, but Ellen's week-end bag was not. He locked the trunk, pulled out the key.

Captain Radin looked up and down the dark road.

"One of Neale's boys was waiting for a coupé with your license plate to pass," he said. "Ellen rounded the curve to find his car sprawled across the road, blocking her way."

"And she grabbed the bag out of the trunk and ran into the woods with it," Lester offered.

"No," Radin said. "The guy wouldn't stop to park his car and then hers neatly off the side of the road before chasing after her. When Ellen had to stop he was standing on the road with a gun. She hadn't a chance. He forced her to park both cars off the road, out of sight of other cars, coming along. He didn't want witnesses."

"Why didn't he take the bag and drive off?" Lester argued. "He didn't want anything but the bag."

"Didn't he?" Radin said quietly.

He looked at the woods. His hand slipped under his coat and came out with a short-barreled automatic. In the warm night Lester shivered.

"Good glory!" Lester said. "Do you think he took her into the woods to kill her?"

Radin didn't reply. He went past Lester's coupé, stopped.

"You've got your car back, Miles," he said. "There's nothing else in this for you."

Lester was in this through no wish of his own. Here was his chance to get out. That would be the sane thing to do.

"I'm seeing it through," he said.

Radin shrugged and went into the woods. Lester followed the glow of the flashlight.

After twenty feet or so, Radin paused, bent down. His light covered a man's slouch hat.

"Ellen's?" Radin asked.

"It looks like it."

Walking on, Radin kept the flashlight beam pointed downward and partially shielded by his fingers so that it would not be visible from any distance. Lester followed at his heels.

The trees were tall and there was little undergrowth. The moonlight did not penetrate here.

Radin stopped again, snapped off his light.

"What—" Lester said, and broke off when Radin gripped his arm.

Ahead and to the left Lester saw a light. His thumping heart was the only sound, until presently there was another—that of a man chuckling softly. And the chuckling voice said:

"I got all night, sweetheart."

Ellen was alive. Lester felt emotion choke him. The most important thing in the world, he realized, was that she was not dead.

Then he saw her. She was in a little clearing, standing in the bright spray of a flashlight—slim and straight in her men's clothes. But now that she had lost her hat, short black curls tumbled about ears and brow.

A man was a few feet away, sitting on a flat rock. In one hand he held a flashlight, in the other a revolver which looked enormous. Behind the flashlight, he was in shadow, but enough of him was visible to show a tall, thin body and a long, pinched face.

"You saw that the bag isn't in the car," Ellen was saying.

"I don't want to know where it isn't, sweetheart. I want to know where it is."

She tossed her curls.

"All right, I'll tell you. Neale and Carter took it."

"Where?"

"In a restaurant ten or fifteen miles back."

"And they let you go?"

"Yes."

The man chuckled again. Lester thought that it was the nastiest sound he had ever heard.

"They didn't let you go, sweetheart. Bag or no bag, you know too much. So you still got it. You hid it on the way."

Ellen was silent.

"So you're going to tell me where it is, sweetheart," the man said. He was enjoying the situation.

He was not like any of the others. Neale was a big-shot politician, Carter an assistant district attorney, Radin a detective-captain. There was desperation in their actions.

But this gaunt man, Lester felt, was evil for its own sake.

"I like talking to pretty girls," he was saying, "but I've had enough for a while. All I want to hear from you is where you hid the bag. If you ain't made up your mind in another minute, maybe a slug in the leg will help you."

"George Neale has it."

In the black darkness Lester whispered to Radin:

"Do something!"

"Wait!" Radin whispered back.

Radin would want to wait—until the man forced Ellen to reveal where she had hidden the bag. Because Radin was as determined as any of the others to get his hands on it.

Now Lester knew why Radin had brought him along—not because he needed help, and certainly not because of friendliness. Radin wanted to keep him within reach because he was not convinced that he knew nothing about the bag.

"And if a forty-five slug in the leg don't open you up," the man went on, "I got a little knife that will. Like I said, I've got all night."

Ellen sagged.

She stood as if huddled against cold, and said nothing.

"The minute's passing quick," the man said, and pointed his gun down at her legs.

Frantically Lester groped for Radin.

"Do something!"

Radin shrugged him off.

Radin would stand by and see her shot, watch her being tortured, until she revealed where she had hidden that bag! Then Radin would take care of the gunman and go after the bag himself. He was letting somebody else do the dirty work for him!

"Time's nearly up, sweetheart. You talking?"

Ellen's head lifted, her firm chin jutted.

She thrust both hands under the waistline of her trousers, the thumbs hooked in the belt, and smiled.

"Brave, eh?" the man said, grudging admiration in his tone. "But let's see how brave you'll be when a slug smashes your kneecap."

"Do something!" Lester shouted soundlessly to himself. "You can't just stand and watch!"

He had been depending on Radin, who had a gun and who was a policemen. Though he knew now that all Radin cared about was the bag. There was only himself to save Ellen, and he was unarmed. Radin had made sure not to let him hang onto either Neale's or Carter's gun.

"In heaven's name, Radin!" he whispered urgently.

But Radin had stepped away in the darkness, and there was no time for Lester to find him. There was not even time to cover the distance between himself and the gunman in the futile hope that he would not himself be shot down before he reached the man.

"Here it comes, sweetheart! In the right knee."

Lester opened his mouth to shout. That might at least force Radin to take action.

The shout stopped in Lester's throat as Ellen spoke.

"You win," she said tonelessly.

The gun dipped. The man laughed. "That's a smart girl. Where is it?"

"You're right—I hid it."

Ellen's shoulders slumped. She pulled her hands out of the waistband of her trousers—and there came the sharp crack of a small gun. It was not as loud as the tall man's scream.

"Radin!" Lester thought. "He's turned soft again!"

Then he saw the small automatic in Ellen's hand. The beam of the flashlight covering her wobbled. The man on the rock was swaying, struggling to keep upright, screaming and fighting for strength to bring his heavy gun to bear on her.

Ellen put a second bullet into him.

His scream was cut in two. His flashlight dropped from suddenly lax fingers, and darkness closed over him and Ellen.

For a moment all that Lester could see was the dull splash of light made by the flashlight which had fallen to the foot of the rock. Then that, too, was hidden as the man tumbled to the ground and covered the beam with his body.

"Ellen!" Lester heard somebody yell, then realized it was his own voice torn involuntarily from his throat.

Blindly he stumbled toward where he had last seen her. A cone of light cut through the darkness. That would be Radin's flashlight. Momentarily it paused at the still form at the base of the rock, then moved on and impaled Ellen Bronson. She was running toward the trees on the farther side.

"Stop!" Radin barked.

She glanced over a shoulder, plunged on.

Radin's gun roared. Ellen didn't falter.

She vanished among the trees.

Lester was running toward Radin's light, yelling at him, cursing him. Radin ignored Lester, racing after Ellen. The trees swallowed him. A moment longer Lester saw his light, then came darkness and silence.

Lester, listening for another shot, an outcry, anything, was panting as if he were running. If only he had a light and a gun!

But there was a light and a gun. He groped forward. What moonlight filtered through the trees vaguely outlined the rock and the man lying beside it. He shoved a hand under the man's chest, found the flashlight, pulled it out. By its light he found the heavy revolver. The man had dropped it when he had been shot the second time.

Lester raced into the woods. He had no idea what he would do if he found Radin. Try to keep him from harming Ellen? Even though he knew Radin was too much for him—too tough and experienced?

He blundered on. Every now and then he paused to listen. He heard nothing but the chatter of insects.

Presently he saw a dim spot of light in the distance. He went toward it, and suddenly he was back in the clearing. He had made a complete circle.

It was Captain Radin's light. He was bending over the man who had been shot. Ellen was not there.

Radin rose. His gun was not in his hand; doubtless he had returned it to his shoulder holster. He did not appear troubled because Lester was pointing a gun at him. But he had faced Neale and Carter when they'd had guns, and that hadn't troubled him either.

"She got away," Radin said. "There's not a chance in the world to find her in the woods at night."

"You chased her to kill her!" Lester said tightly.

"Come now, Miles, do I look like a man who shoots down women?"

"You fired at her."

"You underestimate me, Miles. I don't miss what I want to hit. I shot over her head to persuade her to stop running. It didn't work." Radin smiled. "What a girl! She burned down Digger without batting an eye." He cocked his head, listening. "Ellen might try to skirt around to the cars. Maybe Digger left the key in his."

He started back toward the road.

Lester looked down at the revolver in his hand. Radin was not afraid to turn his back to it.

Lester tagged after him.

The three cars stood where they had left them.

Radin pulled out a pack of cigarettes and extended it to Lester.

"Put up that gun, Miles," Radin said. "If I wanted to get it away from you, I could."

"This one I'm keeping," Lester told him.

Radin shrugged indifferently. Lester dropped the heavy revolver into his pocket, knowing that he couldn't fight Radin with guns—if he had to fight him.

He accepted a cigarette and said, "So you know the man Ellen shot."

"I know most of the Coast City mugs. Digger Denkin was one of George Neale's strong-arm boys. A tough customer, but he died because he was a gentleman."

"What was he—a mug or a gentleman?"

Radin grinned. "Both, in this case. He must have frisked Ellen. He was too careful an operator not to. But because she was a woman, he only patted her pockets. He didn't try to find out if she carried a gun under her belt." Radin was amused, "Maybe not exactly a gentleman. Let's say Digger was merely shy. So now he's a corpse."

"She killed him in self-defense," Lester said. "She shot him the moment before he was going to shoot her."

"Oh, sure. And no doubt she gave George Neale the same sort of chance. But she would've killed Neale too if you hadn't saved his life."

Lester stared at him in bewilderment.

"Isn't it clear?" Radin said, with that amused smile. "Neale had Ellen covered. He didn't suspect any more than Digger did that Ellen

carried a little gun in her waistband. when you socked Neale, you thought you were saving her, but it was the other way around. Girls like Ellen Bronson have a big advantage. They look so soft and pretty and helpless, but how they make suckers out of men!"

"Like she did me." Lester thought.

She had got him into this mess, then had stolen his car. Would she have used her little gun on him if she had considered it necessary?

"She killed Digger in self-defense," he repeated, as if needing to convince himself.

"So what? Chances are Digger's body won't be found for days, and then it'll be only another unsolved mystery for the local police."

"You mean," Lester said slowly, "that you're not going to tell the police about this?"

Radin shrugged. "What for? As you said, it was self-defense. All we'll accomplish would be to get ourselves tangled in red tape."

"You're a police captain," Lester reminded Radin. "How would you act if somebody kept a killing from you in Coast City?"

"I wouldn't like it. But here I'm far from my jurisdiction." Radin flicked ashes from his cigarette. "Are you anxious to hand Ellen over to the cops?"

"It's our duty to tell what happened here."

"Duty!" Radin laughed as if that were a particularly good joke. "If you lived in Coast City, you'd be one of Harold Prescott's do-gooders." Abruptly his laughter ceased. His tone became crisp. "I'm telling you, Miles—let it lay."

"You're afraid that if there's an investigation of this shooting, all the rest will come out," Lester said angrily. "Especially about what's in Ellen's bag."

"Don't try to be too smart, Miles," Radin told him softly. He dropped his cigarette to the ground, stepped on it. "There's your car, Miles. Get into it, drive on, and be thankful you got out of this so easy."

The Captain politely opened the door of Lester's coupé, closed it when Lester was behind the wheel.

"Use your head, Miles." Radin was leaning against the car door, his elbow resting on the window frame. "You're an amateur among professionals. You've nothing to gain, about everything to lose. Open your mouth to anybody about any of this, and I'll testify that you shot Digger Denkin in cold blood. My word will carry weight. And I wouldn't be surprised that Ellen Bronson will corroborate what I say. Catch on?"

"I catch on," Lester said quietly.

This was what he had wanted to do from the first—mind his own business. He had his car back, and Radin was giving him the chance to turn his back on the whole mess.

"Good-by, Captain Radin," he

said, and backed his coupé out to the road.

When it was pointed toward New Hampshire, he looked back. Radin had snapped off his flashlight, was invisible. And the two parked cars were two distorted humps in the night.

Before Lester Miles had gone more than a couple of miles, he became aware of a knock in his motor. He slowed down, listened. Not a knock but a rattle, as if something loose had fallen on the motor and was bouncing with its vibration.

He pulled over to the side of the road, got out, lifted the hood. The flashlight beam revealed everything apparently in order.

And then he saw Ellen's bag.

It was jammed in under the battery. And what he had heard had been the handle of the bag slapping against the cylinder head. The bag was not visible at a glance.

He had found it only because he had been looking for something.

Smart girl, Captain Radin had said of her. When Digger Denkin hadn't found the bag in the car or in the trunk, he had assumed that Ellen had hidden it somewhere. So had Radin.

Lester felt a vast hollowness in the pit of his stomach. He was in it again, deeper than before. He was in possession of the bag for which men were ready to torture and kill, and for which a sweet, attractive young girl like Ellen Bronson had shot a man. He was stuck with it.

Headlights approached from the south. Panic hit him. He snapped out his flashlight, but the headlights of his own car were on, making him and the car visible. He remembered Digger Denkin's gun in his pocket and put his hand on it.

The headlights rushed by. It was a Massachusetts car. Lester, again alone on the road, dug the bag out, closed the hood, placed the bag beside him on the seat.

He ran his car off the road and cut the lights.

He placed the lighted flashlight on the seat and the bag on the floor. There was no lock on the bag—only two clasps. He opened them and lifted the top.

The bag contained two human hands, each severed at the wrist.

Lester straightened up with a jerk, breathing as if he'd just run a great distance. When his trembling lessened, he directed the flashlight beam into the bag.

The hands had belonged to a middle-aged man. They were wrinkled at the knuckles and covered with fuzzy blond hair. Cultured hands, refined hands, showing no sign of physical work, the nails manicured.

There was a signet ring on the small finger on the left hand. The initials on the ring read: "H.P."

Lester Miles didn't need those initials to tell him to whom those hands had belonged. Radin had

mentioned that what was in the bag belonged to Harold Prescott.

Lester closed the bag and looked south. Nothing but darkness, but Neale and Carter were bound to be somewhere not far behind; Radin also, and perhaps ahead were still others. All after Mr. Prescott's hands. All prepared to kill for them.

He replaced the bag under the hood. When he was back in the car, his hands shook so that he had trouble turning the ignition key. He meant to drive as fast as he could to the nearest town and turn the bag and its grisly contents over to the first policeman he saw.

With the motor running, he hesitated. Ellen Bronson would be charged with murder. Two murders, for she had killed Digger Denkin only to avoid giving him Mr. Prescott's hands. What had Radin said about her? "Girls like Ellen Bronson look so soft and pretty and helpless, and how they make suckers out of men!" He was through being used by her.

Savagely he twisted the wheel, ran the coupé back onto the road. He saw headlights coming up fast behind him. Frantically he tried to speed up, but he had only just shifted into high gear when the car behind him tore past—a two-toned green sedan. Two men were in the front seat.

The sedan's brakes squealed. The sedan slowed, turned broadside to the road, stopped. Lester had to apply his own brakes or crash into the car.

Two men tumbled out of the sedan—George Neale and Vincent Carter. In their home town they were highly respectable citizens, a political boss and an assistant district attorney, but here they were two desperate men ready to kill.

Pulling Digger Denkin's heavy revolver out of his pocket, Lester held it against his right knee and sat tight.

The two men came up to the coupé. Somewhere Neale had got hold of another gun. He waved it at Lester.

"Where's Ellen Bronson?" he demanded.

"I don't know," Lester said.

"Who killed Digger Denkin?"

"I never heard that name before, Lester said.

"We found his car off the road a little way back. We looked for Digger and found him dead in the woods." Neale poked his gun through the window. "How'd you get your car back?"

"Radin and I found it parked with another car," Lester told him. "Ellen must have abandoned it. The key was still in the ignition. Radin searched the car, then told me to beat it. I did."

"Radin must have shot Digger and taken the bag!" Carter wailed.

Neale scowled at him. "Then

what do you think happened to Ellen?"

"She's with him," declared Carter.

"I don't believe it. Radin always plays his own game. He wants that bag for blackmail." Neale turned back to Lester. "Did Radin pass you in his car?"

"No."

"Maybe he took a side road." Neale chewed his lower lip. "How do we know the bag isn't still in the car?" he demanded of Lester Miles. "Let's have your keys."

Lester plucked the keys out of the ignition lock and handed them to Neale, who passed them to Carter. The big man went to the rear of the car and searched the trunk. Then he came to the left door and pulled it open. Lester's gun was between his knees, out of sigh. What should he do if they thought of looking under the hood?

They didn't. Carter banged the door shut and lumbered over to Neale.

"What's going to happen to us now?" he groaned.

Neale's face twisted. "We're by no means through. Ellen is headed for her brother's. I think Radin will go there too."

"No!" Carter said thickly. "We haven't a chance."

"You yellow rat!" Neale growled. "Give me those keys!"

He snatched them from Carter and threw them into the darkness beyond the road.

"That'll keep Miles here for a while."

"You're going to let him go?" Carter asked.

Neale looked at Lester, and Lester's finger tightened on the trigger.

"He doesn't matter," Neale snapped. "We're after the ones who do."

He strode to the sedan. Carter tagged sheepishly after him. They drove off.

Lester breathed a weary sigh. He waited for the tail-light of the sedan to disappear, then he leaned down and lifted the floor mat. A spare set of keys lay there. He started the motor and drove slowly.

Ellen Bronson would go on to her brother's place. She would hire a car, or steal one, or get a lift. For all he knew, she might be in that Massachusetts car which had passed a short time ago. And Neale and Carter and maybe some of their henchmen—men as tough and ruthless as Digger Denkin—would follow her.

She had to be warned.

He stopped at a roadhouse. Neale had said there was no telephone in Bronson's New Hampshire home, but he had to find out. He called Information and drew a blank. No telephone for a party named Bronson in that section of the state.

But Ellen had to be warned. Whatever she had done, he wanted to be with her, help her, fight her fight.

All right, he was a sucker. Just the same, he was driving to North Paris.

He avoided the main highways and did not turn toward New Hampshire until he passed Fitchburg, Massachusetts. It was slower, but safer. He had no desire to be again stopped by men with guns.

But he was stopped, shortly after he crossed the state line. The needle of his fuel gauge pointed dangerously near empty. He had hoped to make Nashua, since in a city he would be able to buy gas at that hour, but in the midst of nowhere the motor sputtered and died. And he hadn't passed even a farmhouse in miles.

Nothing had gone right since he had picked up Ellen Bronson in the late afternoon. Now all he could do was wait where he was until daylight. Wait with Mr. Prescott's hands.

Lester knew he had dozed off only when he abruptly awoke with the rising sun in his eyes. He got out to stretch his legs and a small milk truck passed. The driver gave him a lift to a service station which was just opening. It was six-thirty.

At ten minutes to seven he was on his way with a full tank.

All the others must have reached North Paris long ago. But perhaps he was not too late, for he possessed the one thing that mattered —Mr. Prescott's hands. And he was driving directly into danger. Twelve hours ago it would not have occurred to him to be so incredibly foolhardy, but much had happened in those twelve hours.

When he reached North Paris he discovered that the town consisted of a general store and houses scattered on either side of the highway. Lester went into the store.

"Bronson?" the wizened man behind the counter said. "You mean the district attorney?"

Lester frowned. "The local district attorney?"

"This Bronson comes from Coast City, New Jersey. Warren Bronson, the district attorney there. He has a summer place over past Blueberry Ridge."

The name clicked then. In the New York newspaper accounts of the political struggle in Coast City between George Neale and Harold Prescott, Warren Bronson was often mentioned. As Lester recalled it, Bronson had been one of Neale's men, but some time ago he had broken with the political boss and lined up with Prescott.

Nothing but big shots involved in this hideous business. And what, Lester asked himself, was he, a stick-in-the-mud accountant from another city doing in this?

"First dirt road on the left," the storekeeper was saying. "When it ends, you're there."

The rutted dirt road wasn't much more than a cow path, hardly wide enough for one car. Once started up it, there was no way to

turn until the end—no way to escape if a car came toward him or up from behind.

The road ended at a broad, flat, grassy stretch, and there were two buildings, a barn and a sprawling house with many gables. Each structure was at least a hundred years old—maybe older.

Only one car was parked in front of the barn—no doubt Warren Bronson's. None of the others had as yet arrived, or had come and gone, or had hidden their cars nearby.

Lester parked and, keeping his hand on the gun in his pocket, got out. The view from here was magnificent—hills rolling off into infinity. He moved along the side of the barn—and saw a man's shoe. It was protruding from the far corner of the barn, and it was attached to a leg.

For a breathless moment Lester stared at it.

He looked back at the quiet house, then went to that corner of the barn.

The shoe belonged to Vincent Carter. The rest of the assistant district attorney looked like a bag of potatoes tossed carelessly against the wall of the barn. Blood, drying rapidly in the morning heat, formed a ragged splotch over the large area of jacket between the shoulders.

Lester compelled himself to touch the upturned cheek. Carter was dead. He had been stabbed in the back, and perhaps there had not yet been time to get his body out of the way.

Lester clenched his hands to keep them from shaking.

"Get out of here!" an inner voice said. "This is none of your business. It never has been."

But what about Ellen? He had to know.

He was halfway to the house when a woman appeared. Tall and attractive, she wore a flowered housecoat and her bare feet were in sandals.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"Is Ellen here?" he asked.

Fear crossed her face. "Warren!" she shouted.

A man in white ducks and a white T-shirt appeared around a corner of the house. He was a tall, husky, masculine edition of his sister Ellen.

A rifle rested on the crook of his arm. His finger was on the trigger and the muzzle covered Lester's chest.

"Did Ellen get here yet?" Lester asked.

Warren Bronson looked at Lester's coupé and smiled.

"I suppose you're the New Yorker who gave Ellen a lift?"

"I was the sucker, if that's what you mean."

The woman moved to Warren Bronson's side. Lester guessed that she was his wife.

"Darling," she said, "he got his

car back! What does it mean?"

"We'll see," Bronson said. Then to Lester: "Go into the house."

It was an order. Bronson waited until Lester was past, then he and his wife followed. The skin between Lester's shoulders tightened, as if against the coming impact of a rifle bullet. Now that he had brought the bag to them, would they want to get rid of him?

Sucker! When would he stop being a sucker? And suddenly he was no longer afraid. Rage was too strong in him to allow room for fear.

He entered the house and found himself in a large, square hall. Ellen Bronson was coming down the stairs.

She wore a pale green dress and her legs were lovely in nylon stockings. She had put on make-up—not much; just enough. It was the first time he had seen her in women's clothes.

He thought he had never seen anybody so beautiful.

"I saw you from the window," she said, and smiled. "I see you got your car back."

It was a pleasant enough smile, but it drove anger deeper into Lester.

He had done her dirty work for her. He had brought Mr. Prescott's hands to her.

"I got the car back," he said, "after you shot Digger Denken."

She stopped on the lowest step and grasped the banister. The smile had left her face. Lester glanced around and saw that Bronson and his wife stood behind him and that the rifle was still trained on him.

"I thought it was Captain Radin I ran away from," Ellen was saying.

"I was with him."

There was a silence. Lester sidled his back against the wall so he could face all three of them at once.

"Warren, you can put that rifle down," Ellen said. "He's harmless."

Her brother lowered the rifle. Lester took the heavy revolver out of his pocket.

"I'm tired having guns pointed at me," he said. "I'll do the pointing for a change. I may be harmless, but I've stopped being a sucker."

"Did you come here to tell us that?" Ellen said tonelessly.

"No," he told her bitterly. "I came here because I think I've fallen in love with you. I'm admitting that to give you a laugh."

Nobody laughed. Ellen looked at him, and it was as if she were pleased by what she saw.

He pulled his eyes away from her. "But that's not the whole reason. I came to return Harold Prescott's hands."

Bronson studied the revolver curiously. "So you're not just a poor innocent?"

"I've learned. I've been compelled to learn."

"Is my bag still in your car?" Ellen asked breathlessly. "We'd about given it up."

Lester didn't answer that. He

said grimly: "I'm wondering what you intend for me now. Am I slated to be murdered like Vincent Carter has been?"

Mrs. Bronson uttered a choked cry. Ellen and Warren Bronson stared at him.

"What about Carter?" Bronson said.

"You'll find him behind your barn. He died of a knife in his back."

Ellen found her voice. "And you think we did it?"

"I saw you shoot Digger Denkin."

"He gave me no choice."

"All right, that was self-defense," Lester conceded. "And Carter came here to kill. But you didn't defend yourself against him. He was stabbed in the back."

"I don't believe it," Ellen said.

Bronson shrugged. "Let's see for ourselves." He moved toward door, holding the rifle by the barrel.

"Leave the rifle here," Lester snapped.

Bronson's mouth twisted sardonically. He placed the rifle against the wall, and they all went out, with Lester bringing up the rear, and this time he was the one who had the gun. It was as if he were standing outside himself, incredulously watching himself. Because he was no longer the man he had been a few hours ago. Anger had changed him.

When they reached Carter's body, they found Captain John Radin standing over it. His car was not in sight. He must have parked some distance back so that he would not be observed approaching the house.

The sight of the detective-captain frightened the two women more than did the sight of the murdered man. Ellen stopped abruptly and crossed her arms at her shoulders. Mrs. Bronson gave a half-stifled moan. Lester felt the revolver become heavy in his hand.

"The rats gather," Warren Bronson commented drily. "Though I don't think, Captain, that you'd knife a man in the back."

The accusation seemed to amuse Radin. He didn't take the trouble to defend himself. He leaned one shoulder indolently against the barn wall and smiled at Lester's revolver.

"I see I underestimated you, Miles. Maybe I shouldn't have let you keep Digger's gun. Stop pointing it at me."

Radin's hand was not near his shoulder-holster. Yet he was sure of himself, was giving the orders. Lester's teeth clicked. His anger reached out to enclose the red-headed detective as well as the others. He was surprised that his hand holding the revolver was so steady.

"I've been pushed into this against my will," he said. "Now I'm staying in for a while. Ellen, he's got a gun under his left shoulder. Take it."

Listlessly, Ellen obeyed. And Radin stood completely relaxed, his hard mouth smiling crookedly, as she plucked the automatic out from under his shoulder.

"Bring that gun to me," Lester snapped.

The words sounded ridiculous as soon as they were out of his mouth. If she refused, he couldn't shoot her. He couldn't shoot any of them in cold blood, not even Radin. He was relieved when she handed him the automatic, then moved back to where her brother and sister-in-law stood.

Radin beamed at Lester, as if proud of him. "Not bad for an amateur, Miles. But what will it get you?"

Lester wasn't sure. He felt like a caricature of a Western badman. But he had all the guns in sight, and that was what counted. Nobody would keep poking any more at him for a while. What about Ellen's little gun? He looked her over and decided that she couldn't have it anywhere under that simple dress.

"I'll get some truth, maybe," Lester answered Radin. "Ellen, how did you get hold of Prescott's hands?"

"I stole them."

"If we're going to have a discussion here around a dead man," Warren Bronson said testily, "it's all right with me. Ellen is my confidential secretary. Neale's grip on Coast City politics is so great that even in my own office, the district attorney's office, I can trust nobody but my own sister." He scowled down at the dead man. "It's obvious now that Carter, one of my top assistants, was secretly one of Neale's men."

"What I want to know," Radin asked, "is which one of Neale's goons knocked off Prescott?"

"It was George Neale himself," Ellen told him promptly.

Radin's eyebrows arched. "He's not that dumb."

"He was when he did that the night before last," Ellen said. "And I know enough to know that the reason grew out of the fact that a year or two ago Neale used his influence to cover up a murder committed by one of his lieutenants. I don't know the details, but it's plain enough that Neale made himself an accessory. So did Carter, because he used the district attorney's office to cover up after Neale. Somehow Prescott got hold of the evidence to prove how Neale was involved. Neale and Carter heard of it and went to his house and tried to bribe him. Prescott turned him down cold. He even went to the phone to call the Governor right then and there, so Neale got panicky and shot Prescott."

Radin clucked his tongue.

"Corny stuff, cutting off the wrists," he commented. "Cops can identify bodies in other ways."

"What happened," Ellen said,

"was that Neale got one of his goons, Creep Flint, to get rid of the body. He was supposed to tie weights to it and throw it into the river."

Radin grinned. "I get the picture now. Creep cut off the hands and let Neale know it. Figured he could turn a pretty penny through blackmail. Pay up or I use these hands to prove that Prescott was murdered. The mere fact that Prescott was murdered automatically pointed to Neale as the murderer."

"Yes," Ellen said. "Creep Flint knew that what he was doing was dangerous to himself. Yesterday morning he brought the hands in a small bag to Carter in the district attorney's offices. He thought he would be safe in doing that, for if anything went wrong he could run to Warren for protection. Most of the staff was away on vacation, and Carter and I were almost the only ones there. I'd relieved the switchboard girl for a few minutes and I heard Carter put through a call to Neale and ask him to come right over."

"Carter was always a dope," Radin commented. "Why did he have Neale come there?"

"He had no choice," Ellen explained. "Creep Flint refused to leave or turn over the hands until he was paid right then and there. There's a small storeroom attached to Carter's private office and an entrance to it from the outer office, so I hid in there. When Neale arrived, I heard everything that was said. Neale brought money and gave it to Creep Flint, and Creep turned the bag over to him and Carter."

"Anybody want to bet that Flint is a corpse?" Ralin said. "Mugs don't blackmail George Neale and live."

Ellen brushed a hand over her curls. She looked undisturbed by Lester's gun. But carefully she avoided looking at the dead man.

"It was Carter's job to get rid of the hands," she went on. "I followed him. I had a gun. I held him up as he was getting into his car and took the bag away from him."

Radin chuckled. "Didn't I tell you she was quite a girl, Miles?"

Lester flushed. He was being kidded by Radin. He was convinced that he made a preposterous picture standing there with those two guns, while Ellen and Radin did all the talking. They had completely taken the play away from him.

Lester plunged into the talk, asserting himself. "I can guess the rest of it," he said. "Ellen, you knew that Neale and Carter and their mugs would be right behind you. You didn't dare hide the hands in Coast City because you knew they had ways to make you talk. And there was nobody but your brother you could trust, and he was in New Hampshire. You couldn't communicate with him because he has no phone here. So

you dressed as a man and borrowed a car and headed here. Once you got here with the hands, your brother would turn them over to the local police for safekeeping and Neale and Carter would be in the soup."

"I'm sorry I stole your car," Ellen said woodenly, "but I couldn't trust anybody. Neale is lavish with bribes and guns." She turned her head toward the red-headed detective. "And there was Captain Radin on my trail, too. I feared him most."

"Come now, Ellen," Radin chided her. "I'm not such a bad guy."

"You'd want those hands for your own purpose, Captain," Warren Bronson said tightly. "Probably to make a deal with Neale for a better job. Say the job of Police Commissioner?"

"Could be," Radin didn't hesitate to admit. "Only I'm an old softy. I had to go and save Miles here from Neale and antagonize the big boss. He made me offers, but they didn't mean anything, because Neale doesn't forgive." He grinned at Lester's guns. "And that's your gratitude."

"At any rate, Captain," Lester said, "I doubt that you murdered Carter. I've come to know you pretty well since last night, and I can't see you stabbing a man in the back. You'd kill a man, but not by sneaking up behind him."

"I'm flattered, Miles," Radin told him, with only a trace of mockery. "But why did you come here, and why are you throwing your weight around? Because you're after the hands, or because you've already got them?"

"I've got them."

"Ah." Radin turned to face the district attorney. "Did you knife Carter?"

"My bet is that you did, Captain," Bronson said.

"Wait a minute," Lester said. "Carter was a coward. I think that when he got here and saw that Ellen had arrived, he realized that the game was up. His nerve gave way completely. Neale suspected that Carter would give state's evidence to save his own skin, and so Neale pulled out a knife and—"

He broke off. Radin's broad shoulders had jerked.

"You say Neale knifed Carter?" Radin said in a curious tone.

"I'm sure of it," Lester replied. "I saw how Carter's nerve was failing. They got here this morning, and after Neale knifed Carter he left because—" Again he broke off, "You think Neale didn't leave?"

Warren Bronson said hoarsely, "Neale wouldn't leave here without—"

They all froze at the sound of a low chuckle.

Neale, looking jaunty in his blue slacks and yellow polo shirt, came around the corner of the barn. His gun was in his hand.

"Without the bag?" Neale fin-

ished Bronson's sentence. "Precisely. Look behind you, Miles."

Lester looked over his shoulder. He saw the blank barn wall, but when he raised his eyes he saw a window some ten feet above the ground. Framed in the window were two strange faces. Hard, impassive faces. Neale must have collected his remaining thugs who had been watching the roads for Ellen. Each of them had a gun angled down at Lester's head.

"So you'll drop both your guns, Miles," Neale was saying.

The silence in that clear morning air was like death. Then it was broken by a ragged whimper from Mrs. Bronson who was sagging against her husband. The district attorney stood like a rock. Ellen's hands were clasped in front of her in an attitude of strained waiting. Captain Radin kicked at a blade of grass and looked disgusted.

"If you don't drop those guns at once," Neale said softly, "one of my boys will put a bullet in your head."

The guns felt heavy and awkward and futile in Lester's hands, but clinging to them was like clinging to life. There was nothing but those guns between him and death, between the others and slaughter, and yet what use were they now?

"Listen!" he said. "You were in the barn while we were talking here. You were waiting for one of us to tell where Harold Prescott's hands are. You had to reveal yourself when we realized that although you'd murdered Carter you were still nearby."

"So?" Neale said.

"You heard me admit that I have the hands. I'm the only one who does know where they are. If you shoot me, you'll never get them."

"That'll be all right with me," Neale said, smiling. "I'd like them never to be found. Are you dropping those guns?"

And then what? Neale couldn't afford to let live anybody who knew he had murdered Prescott.

"And I did this to them," Lester thought dully. "I disarmed Bronson and then Radin and put them at Neale's mercy."

Radin's eyes were on him, steady and intense, as if trying to tell him something. And Radin's right hand moved slightly in an underhand gesture as if tossing something invisible. A sign of what?

"All right, if you want it now," Neale said crisply, and he lifted his eyes to signal the men at the window to shoot.

Lester threw the revolver into Neale's face.

Instinctively Neale flung up a hand to ward off the missile. Lester didn't see the rest. He was spinning, close against the barn wall, and he glimpsed two thugs up there gaping, momentarily stunned by the nature of the attack. Then they leaned far out of the window to bring their guns to bear on him.

The heavy automatic jumped in Lester's hand. He was shooting wildly up at that window, but the shots drove the thugs back from their exposed position.

From the ground came a shot. Lester glanced around. Radin and Neale were both on the ground. Neale was motionless, probably knocked out by Radin. And Radin had grabbed the revolver and was shooting up at the window.

Above a man screamed. Something fell from the window, and when it hit the ground Lester saw that it was a gun. One of the thugs hung limply over the sill, half in and half out. Radin had shot him dead.

"Keep the other one away from the window!" Radin yelled at Lester.

Radin was running, and he disappeared around the corner of the barn.

Bronson and his wife and Ellen were huddled against the barn wall, as far as they could get out of line with the window.

Lester swung back toward the window and shot up at it. The thug up there was not visible. The shots were keeping him back, or else he was in flight. Lester held his fire.

A single shot sounded in the barn. Then breathless, almost unendurable silence.

Captain Radin came around the corner of the barn. He was grinning.

"That takes care of that," he said cheerfully.

Lester Miles was suddenly wearier than he had thought a man could be. He leaned against the barn.

"What a blow-up there'll be when we get back to Coast City," Radin was saying to Bronson. "Neale will stand trial for murder. His machine will be smashed. You and I, Bronson, will be sitting on top of the heap. You'll be mayor for the asking. I'll settle for the job of police commissioner."

Holding one arm about his wife, Bronson thoughtfully rubbed his chin with his other hand. "You've got something there, Captain. We'll discuss it later."

Already, Lester thought bitterly, they were dividing up Coast City. He didn't care. All that mattered to him was that now he would be able to drive on to his sister's place.

Ellen was at his side. She put a soft hand on his arm.

"I think you're wonderful," she said.

He looked down into her glowing black eyes, into her lovely face. He felt nothing at all. Maybe later it would be different. His one desire now was to get away from here —away from guns and dead men and politicians.

(Continued from other side)

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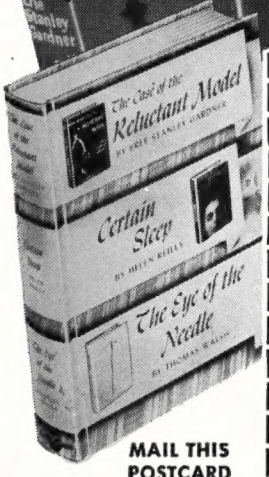

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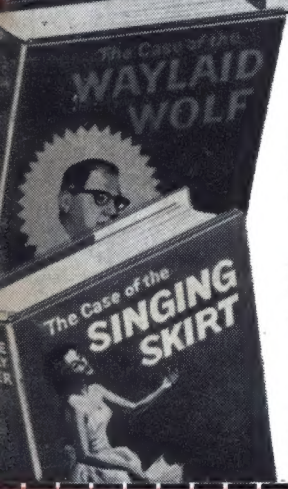

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